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A NOVEL OF THE LAWLESS WEST

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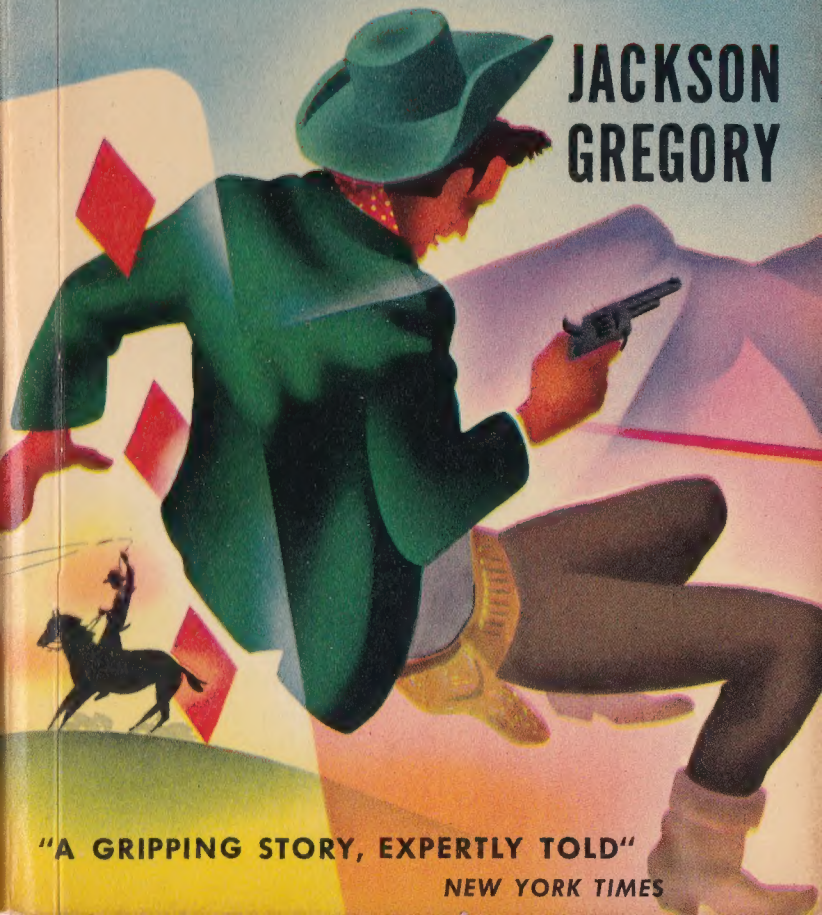
Secret Valley

JACKSON GREGORY



"A GRIPPING STORY, EXPERTLY TOLD"

NEW YORK TIMES

A NOVEL OF THE LAWLESS WEST

SECRET VALLEY

JACKSON GREGORY

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CHAPTER I

IN THOSE DAYS, if you got to Fiddler's Gulch, most folks said you got to the end of the world. It was far, very far out in the Western Wilderness.

Then, if you went on any farther, you got to Three Fools' Pass. And thus you came inescapably to the old monstrosity of a house squatting there, high up on the mountain ridge, Black Jack Devlin's place. The Mountain House, they called it.

And if you got there— Well, some said it was well worth the long and hazardous journey, and others of paler blood were sorry they had ever left some snug berth in the land where the sun came up. Here the sun went down, a glorious, warm, red sun.

Black Jack Devlin's place hunkered on a benchland just above the pass; from its wide puncheon porches under shakey roofs you could look down on one hand into the shadowy depths of Secret Valley. You could look down, on the other hand, into the mysterious gloom of Lost Valley. For the pass was high up, commanding a hog's back ridge which separated the two dark, dusky, fertile and somehow both forbidding and lovely valleys.

Black Jack Devlin himself was a gambler of the old school.

He had a daughter who was the apple of his eye. Her name had been Rose Devlin. Later she decided on Rosalie. At run-away sixteen she named herself Rose-alba. She had read a fairy tale with a Rose-alba in it; that meant White Rose. She loved white roses; they were rare in her life; she had seen only one that a man had brought from Santa Fé. She wanted, in certain moods, to be a white rose herself.

Not only was she a gambler's daughter; she was a gambler.

During that year not less than seven hundred men had poured through the pass, many going on lingeringly, not to come back; many more passing back and forth, back and forth, between the mines in the north and the town of

Liberty down in the lower country. Out of the seven hundred, perhaps six hundred and ninety-odd wanted her.

She was young, and so she dramatized herself. She dressed like something very exotic she had seen pictured in a magazine which had straggled up here, months old, from Santa Fé. It came not long after the white rose. And she was intrinsically lovely.

Also, like most gamblers, like her father Black Jack Devlin, she cheated at cards. And she got away with it.

There, to start with, we have something of Black Jack Devlin, and a drop more of Rose-alba.

The wide porch of the Mountain House skirted three sides of the rambling old log-and-stone building. From the eastern porch you looked down into Secret Valley; that was where the Haverils dwelt and rioted and squandered all they ever possessed. From the southern end, high above the rocky backbone of the ridge, you got glimpses of the lower ends of both deep-cleft valleys. From the west you looked down into Lost Valley; that was where Tom Storm held forth.

Then there was a third valley, and its owner held it to be not only the finest of all but quite the most lovely spot on earth, a perfect Vale of Alombroso, and accordingly named it the Valley of Paradise. Only, being an old and sentimental Spanish gentleman, his name for it was El Paraiso, which means Paradise, so everyone called it Paradise Valley. The conformation of the mountains here was peculiar; ancient glaciers had worked their wills eons earlier and had gone the way of all flesh and ice; they had left behind them deep gorges like Norwegian fiords, and tall sheer cliffs; there was the ridge high up on which stood the old Mountain House, with that spine of rock creating a high barrier between Secret Valley and Lost Valley. Then, toward the south, the ridge was split asunder, and between its halves lay the head of Paradise Valley.

The old Spanish family of Valdez y Verdugo, having moved up from Santa Fé a hundred years earlier, had held it all the while, a tolerant and bountiful and merciful God alone knowing how.

And down in Paradise Valley, too, there was a girl.

She was the niece of old Señor Francisco de Valdez y Ver-

dugo. She was like a flower; like a southern flower—like a magnolia. Also she was pretty much like a young queen, as haughty and soft-handed and useless, and used to issuing decrees.

So, then, there were these people whose life-lines, all without their suspecting it, were of a sudden to be entangled:

Black Jack Devlin.

His reckless, picturesque, card-playing daughter, Rose-alba.

Tom Storm down in Lost Valley.

Don Francisco, lording it over Paradise Valley—and at times biting his aristocratic nails and lifting hungry eyes toward the lofty Mountain House.

The Spanish-American girl, like a queen, for whom the Valley of Paradise was such a proper setting, the Señorita Carmencita.

And there was a Haveril—one of the Secret Valley Haverils—though for years he had been somewhere down in South America. But tired of adventuring, remembering his boyhood home in the mountains in the Southwest, for which he grew homesick after fifteen years of life on the far, open trails, he had at last harkened to the slap-slap of waves out on the Pacific, heading north again—thinking of nothing but the joy of home-coming to Secret Valley.

That he did not think of the little Carmencita, nor of Rose-alba on the mountain, nor of Tom Storm in Lost Valley or of Black Jack Devlin, was because he didn't know any of them except Tom Storm, and he didn't know that Storm was here. He had run away to go adventuring when a lad of ten.

These, then, by life's hidden, altogether devious and inscrutable devices, were being led to the converging point. As also were Bob Roberts of the North Star Mine, and an odd chap whom everybody called Hannigan, though his name was something else, and old Romero, a leathern-faced rascal with a pure and romantic heart. Had they known, some of them would have turned their faces in other directions— Or, all being warmly human, would they have nonetheless rushed into the adventure with the fine spirit and devil-may-care abandon of moths into the candle flame?

Quien sabe?

CHAPTER II

BLACK JACK DEVLIN of a green summer afternoon came out on his porch that was as good as a lookout station. He wore high black boots that shone like Claude Lorrain mirrors, a spotless white silk shirt, a long-tailed coat, the biggest and broadest-brimmed black hat in all New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona and Texas. He made a sort of bow as he saw his little daughter, who had come out on the same porch from another door, appearing around the corner.

He thought he had never seen her look so lovely. He said, "I am going to send you away, Kid. I am spoiling you up here. This is no longer any place for you. You—"

"I have been counting the money," she said, and laughed at him and made one of her piquant saucy faces at him, and came to slip her arm through his. "That's what makes my cheeks so pink and my eyes so bright. You know, Jack—"

"How old are you anyhow?" he demanded. He tried to be gruff with her. "I seem to remember having read poems somewhere when I was young and foolish and read poems and saw moons come up. It said of some old fellow—or rather the old fellow, coming suddenly awake, said to himself 'What ho, my lords! I have slept! My beard has grown into my lap!' There was a picture, too; he looked all bothered about it, seeing himself like that. Now, while I've been thinking of other things—"

"Only you never think! You can fool other people; you can't fool me! And with the money we've taken in during the last two weeks—what with the mines running full blast, and the cattle men thriving, and all of them paying us tribute—"

"I can send you away!" he said triumphantly. They kept strolling along the wide veranda, her arm in his, his eyes on the deep-cleft valleys, her eyes watchfully on him. "Down to some finishing school in Albuquerque—or in Los Angeles or San Francisco even, or — "

"Any time that you think you can get rid of me like that—"

"You're over seventeen, and I know it." He stopped, she

with him, and he leaned against the porch rail and looked down, almost straight down, into Secret Valley. "Of course you are! Why you were eighteen your last birthday! You're almost nineteen! Or is it twenty? What ho, my lords! I have slept and my daughter has grown into a young woman!"

"Jack Devlin!" said Rose-alba. "Will you listen to me?"

"When you were just a kid, it was all right," said Devlin. "Now it's different. I don't like the way these damned young mountain savages are looking at you. And I don't like the way you look back at one or two of them. And so—"

"There's Bob Roberts, who owns I don't know how many mines—and who can't play poker for sour apples," said Rose-alba. "He's a handsome devil, though. And there's scowly Tom Storm, down in Lost Valley, and he—"

"A young woman your age," said Jack Devlin, coming the heavy parent, and both sounding and looking so stern that she squeezed his arm in both her hands and laughed up into his face, "has no business playing cards. She oughtn't even to know one card from another. And as for faro or roulette or—"

"You taught me to play draw when I was six years old," she laughed at him. "And who but you taught me the foxy way to bet and skip bets on stud? And when I had luck running high, the way I did when I was ten, I took you to the cleaner! Me, little Rose Devlin, took old Black Jack to the cleaner at his own game—even when he was so hard run that he had to palm a card once, and twice dealt off the bottom! Oh, you great big bluff! You great big *baby-bluff!*"

"Now look here, dammit," said Black Jack.

But she cried "Shame! Such naughty words to a little girl only not-quite-twenty who shouldn't know one card from another! A little girl that you think— *You!*—that you're going to shut up in a convent!"

"Rose, darling—"

"Don't try going soft on me, Jack Devlin! It won't work."

"Dammit!" said Devlin, very heartily this time,

"Hell take it!" laughed Rose-alba.

All-in-all they were quite happy and care-free that green summer afternoon. They called it "Green Summer" up there, because it was that precious, really priceless season that came after the high mountain springtime ended and be-

fore the true summer began; yes, there were a few days, at blessed best a few weeks, when there was a season which didn't seem quite of the earth, but heavenly rather. The sun was soft and caressingly warm; the valleys were richly green and all adorned with little mountain flowers so delicately tinted and so tender-petalled that they partook of the ethereal; the times of sunup and sundown, of moonrise and moonset, or starlight and even of midday were somehow ineffable.

Of a sudden Black Jack Devlin yanked himself up out of his softened mood. At the same moment he sharply withdrew his arm from his little daughter's clinging hands. He turned a pair of icy eyes down upon her gay ones.

Next he sneered at her. His upper lip twitched in scorn, and a most contemptuous twitch it was, and his ebony, needle-pointed moustache quivered like the venomous sting of a scorpion. He achieved altogether quite an impressive sneer.

"You!" he said. "You fancy yourself a gambler!" He began to laugh. "Why, don't you realize that after all you're just a—just a—a chit! You couldn't—"

"Put a name to it, Kid," giggled Rose-alba. "What's up your sleeve?"

"You're getting out of this! Get me? You're going away!"

"Like hell I am," she dimpled at him. And when Rose-alba Devlin dimpled, the effect was like the first whisper of spring.

Still he scoffed at her.

"You fancy yourself a gambler! At your age! A downy linnet—a downy dove—and you'd tackle an eagle—"

She clapped her hands. She loved to do things like that; you might have thought at many a time, even when she was all alone in her room—perhaps before a mirror—that she was playing before a spellbound audience.

"And you're the eagle?"

"I'll play you one hand of draw to see whether you go or stay!" said Devlin.

"I'll cut the cards with you, high card win," said Rose-alba. "That's quicker. And we'll have the boys dropping in any minute now. I'm sure that Tom Storm—"

"Come ahead," said her father. "Cut the cards, and high card wins."

"On the level, Jack?" she demanded, eyeing him. "No crooked business!"

"On the level, Kid."

"Let's get going!"

They swung in at the first door, again arm in arm. It was a big room, in its way a glorious old room. Years ago, when Jack Devlin had fancied himself as a landed proprietor, this had been the enormous living room which was planned to be the large and warm and generous heart of his household. Low, wide windows looked out to east, south and west, and the view was unlimited; you could look forth over the dark valleys, across ridge after ridge of purple mountains, and on beyond the mountain crests into infinity. Now the place was fitted at one end with a bar. There were covered tables: You could have poker, roulette, faro, black jack—you could have pretty much anything you named, provided you had the money to make it worth while. There were bright Indian rugs and three or four bearskins; a fireplace that was famous, being extravagant in size and in gold-flecked quartz trimmings.

Black Jack took a fresh, sealed deck of cards from a cupboard. Rose-alba hovered about him, watching his every movement suspiciously.

He broke the seal.

As quick as a flash she snatched the cards away from him.

"Let me look at those! If I catch you trying to cheat me—"

She whirled and sped to the nearest window where the light was better, studying their backs. She shrugged and came back to the small table from which he had just whisked the cover.

She put them down.

"Forgive me," she said, sounding contrite, "if I suspected you?"

"Shuffle?" he asked politely.

"Let 'em run," said Rose-alba.

"The devil I will!" snorted Black Jack, and shuffled them himself. "Cut?" he asked, politer than ever.

"Let 'em ride, Kid," she said.

"Fine. Ready? Let's go. The lady first, for the high card."

She tapped the deck with a thoughtful finger, then sliced the cards neatly, making a deep cut. Her own card she kept face down while she waited for him.

Devlin didn't keep her waiting more than a second. He too sliced the deck. Together they flipped their cards over, each for the other to see.

Then they stood looking at each other, he staring frowningly at her, she laughing at him.

He had cut the ace of clubs.

She had cut the ace of diamonds.

"Dammit!" said Jack Devlin.

"Hell take it!" laughed Rose-alba Devlin.

"Look here—" Devlin began.

"You look here!" taunted Rose-alba. And with a sudden gesture she produced as from the air—but he knew they came from under her arm—two more cards. She tossed them to the table, face down. "You lose, old boy. And you think *you* can teach *me* anything about dealing a hand!"

He knew before he flipped the cards over. There she had the two other aces.

"And my three aces beat your one—and I don't go into anybody's convent yet awhile!" she informed him.

Then she reached up and kissed him and went dancing away to the door.

There was a mirror on the wall, an enormous mirror. Everything that Black Jack Devlin had to do with was on the large side. The mirror took up all the space between two windows; it had cost him six hundred dollars to acquire the thing and have it carried up along wilderness trails and installed. He had known at times that it wasn't worth it.

Right now it was worth all that, and more.

Because he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of turning to look after her as she pirouetted on her way, but without turning he could watch her, reflected.

Today was one of her (not unusual) extravagant days. She was dressed all in black; black velvet it was. He knew that she was aping him and doing it impishly. He wondered where in the devil she had got the rig, or the stuff to make it.

A black velvet jacket that was gay and jaunty. A short

black velvet skirt. High, black, glistening boots. Her hair gone wild under a wide black hat. Silver, silver girdle and buckles—

Dammit, the Kid was pretty! Pretty? Lovely, and more than that. And full of the devil. Full of life and daring, pulsing to the tune of the sort of dreams that a girl like her would dream. And the little devil—

As she reached the door she tossed him over her shoulder, from rosy, bunched finger tips, a kiss; tossed it into the mirror to bounce back at him. She knew all the time, without looking, that he would be watching her.

And, posing on the threshold, still without looking backward, she called to him, registering melodrama.

"Father! Oh, father! I see a dust cloud on the High Trail! There are men coming! Shall I run and hide?" She pretended to shade her eyes to peer off into a great distance. "Why, one of them is Mr. Bob Roberts, the great mining man! A great man, but still how young! When are you ever going to get me that spyglass you promised me? Right now I could be looking into Bob's eyes! And I could look down into Lost Valley, or into Secret Valley—or even down into the Valley of Paradise where the ladylike Señorita Carmencita lives! But most of all—don't you suppose?—I'd use the glass to watch somebody down in Lost Valley? Tom Storm, maybe."

Then she scampered out before he could say a word, and closed the door in a hurry—and even so he could hear her laughing at him.

CHAPTER III

AS THE SUN rolled down toward the western ridges, the earliest shadows marched into Lost Valley, and it was down there first of all that pin-points of fire showed where lamps were lighted in the ranch house, and in the men's quarters. Next to be drawn into the darkness was the Valley of Paradise; then far, bright lights began to twinkle down there too. Next, taking its turn, Secret Valley darkened, and lighted its lamps and lanterns.

And after that, for a full quarter of an hour the Moun-

tain House, high on the hog's-back ridge above Three Fools' Pass basked in the sun, its windows brightest of all.

There was scarcely an evening in the year, except when white winter was raging through the mountains and fluttering its silver curtains from the stormy skies, that big Tom Storm, down in Lost Valley, did not stand for a moment and look up at the flash of the Mountain House windows, the last brightness before the dark gathered in everything.

And from Paradise Valley, too, one could see the sinking sun's reflection from Black Jack's impressive windows. Little Carmencita Valdez, when a tiny girl, used to come out of the Spanish *patio,* her doll hugged to her breast, and stand enraptured, looking up at what she had grown to feel sure was an enchanted castle out of a fairy tale.

"I want to go up there!" she used to say. "I want to wear a pretty dress and ride a white horse with silver and jewels on the saddle and bridle, and go up there!"

"It is a bad place," they told her.

"*Muy malo,* there is a curse on it. You must never go. Never, never, never! They are bad, bad people. They steal and lie and rob and kill. Do not look that way, Chiquitita."

So she shuddered quite deliciously—since in her baby eyes the place looked so safely far away—and went on dreaming about it. She simply repeopled it; she filled it with ogres instead of golden princes and princesses.

That was when she was six and seven and eight maybe even ten. But now she, like Black Jack Devlin's daughter, was hovering among her very latest 'teens like a butterfly among flowers. Now she knew that they weren't ogres up there—well, not exactly ogres anyhow—and she knew who some of the men were who rode that way: Big Tom Storm, their neighbor for one, and Bob Roberts, the handsome mining man for another—and still others. And two or three times in her life she had seen the picturesque gambler himself, Black Jack Devlin; and she had heard and heard *and heard* of Black Jack's daughter until she was aching with curiosity to see her.

But never once in her life had she been within two or three miles of the Mountain House. They still told her, "It

is a bad place. It is no place for a highborn lady like you! Certainly not for Señorita Carmencita de Valdez! Not even for your uncle. He never goes there!"

And so of course she began to go mildly mad in her desire to visit the forbidden place—the place which the romantic little miss called to herself "The Castle of Wicked Things." She no longer believed all the frightful stories they had told her so long ago, because she had grown to be a quick-witted young woman, as nimble as her thoughts as a deer on its four lightning-swift legs. She was no longer gullible, not over-credulous saving when pretty speeches were made to her and she was told how infinitely lovelier she was than any other girl, with oh-so-much bigger and brighter eyes and lips that drove men to distraction and a voice which got into men's blood!—and all that. After all, that she was as vain as a peacock was not altogether her fault: For one thing she had been flattered by everybody from cradle days on until now; for another thing, there have been mighty few mirrors in this world reflecting such glowing charms as she, behind her locked door, could witness at any time by peeking into Señorita Carmencita's mirror. (It, by the way, was nearly as large as Black Jack Devlin's.)

But though she had outgrown her open-mouthed acceptance of the horrors told to her of the Mountain House and its occupants and their nocturnal visitors, she continued to feel attracted to the place's intriguing wickedness. A man *had* been killed up there once, she knew that; only two years ago, too. No one ever knew who killed him or why; it never made much difference, just as the man himself, a nobody from nowhere, a brawler and a cheap cheat, had never made much difference. But the incident added to the sinister interest of the lofty log-and-stone house. And there had been wild times, brawls and games with the starry skies for a limit, and all that. And always, pictured in her mind, there were the gambler Jack Devlin—and his daughter, named so queerly Rose-alba—the White Rose—and beautiful—

"I am going up there," said Carmencita to herself. "And I am not going to wait very long, either. Am I going to live another hundred years down here in this quiet valley where nothing ever happens, and never once go up to a place that

I have been looking up at for the last hundred years? *Vamos a ver?* But we are going to see, no?"

For promise, she put her lips against the lips in her mirror.

The Hacienda del Paraiso was what was to be expected of an old Spanish estate in New Mexico, one that was in fact older by a good bit than Carmencita's fictional span of years. The trees about the big main building were ancient, and brewed a mellow and delightful shade; there were high whitewashed walls about the acres of grounds and gardens; and, of course, there were Castilian roses everywhere, the roses that were so red that almost they were black, and pure white ones and— Oh, the yellow roses! Since she could toddle, the little Señorita had aways loved a yellow rose in her hair. And the spacious *patio*—the *placita,* they called it affectionately—was a bowery place to dream in—to grow romantic in—to make love in when all things permitted. *Which they never did!*

This evening Carmencita Valdez, dressed in white that floated about her like a cloud, and equipped with her mantilla of old tradition, and brushing a beloved rose against her reddened lips, came down the stairs from her room on the inner balcony overlooking the patio—posing at every step, at every breath she drew—even though she feared there were no eyes to see. Her breast was rising and falling rather more swiftly than a girl's breast should when she is merely stepping lingeringly downstairs to no assignation whatever; and her magnolia cheeks were tinted with nature's own coloring; and her eyes were moistly bright—they spoke of some inner excitement.

In fact, Carmencita was some degrees lovelier just then than even she herself knew. And she did not altogether know what had quickened her breathing. Nothing had happened; did anything ever happen here? But—

But she had been thinking that same old thought, "I am going up to that place. And I am not going to wait all the time, either! *Valgame!*"

She didn't know that she was going there tonight.

Just the same she was queerly piqued by the thoughts she had been thinking, formless and vague though they were perforce; she was going downstairs, then along the arched

corridor with its niches set in the walls, harboring saint and crucifix—and she was going straight to her seat in the *patio* from which she could look high up and see the golden gleam on the forbidden windows.

Old Romero was pottering about the patriarchal olive tree that had been planted there, so said tradition, by the first Vladez to come this way. (Señorita Carmencita, to show you that she was not entire credulity, did not believe the story; any Valdez, instead of planting a tree himself would stand by—sit by, more likely—and give orders while an Indian servant did the work. "We keep our hands clean from soil and toil," wasn't exactly the motto of her family, but it might as well have been, and Carmencita knew it.)

As she sank, still as though before hushed spectators, to her bench, she looked without any pleasure at all in old Romero's direction. She said under her breath, *"Uf!,"* the Spanish *"Ufl"* which sounds like a shuddersome "Oof!" She wished he were not there; she regarded him as she might have regarded a caterpillar crawling on her high-heeled slipper.

It wasn't that she didn't love old Romero with all her heart. Only he didn't fit properly into her mood.

He saw her and removed his hat and beamed. He adored this little flower of the House of Valdez y Verdugo; his adoration for her was such as he gave the blessed saints. Leathern-faced old rascal that he was, for her his heart was all snow white purity and romance. He would still, at his sixty years, go galloping like a wild colt on an errand for her —any errand. *Por Dios!* Any errand whatever! If she merely wanted a few throats cut— Ha! You just whisper to Romero!

She pretended not to see him.

Her eyes were on the golden glitter of those mysterious, inviting, faraway, intimidating, always luring windows of The Castle of Wicked Things.

"And I won't wait another hundred years either," said Carmencita, restless on her bench under the orange tree. She had a way of patting with her foot, inherited no doubt, from ancestresses who had been just like her.

But then she had said that so many times! For how many

years? She sighed and suddenly felt like crying, she was so lonely and forsaken by life and so marooned on the desolate Island of Nothing-ever-happens.

Tia Juana came thumping into the *patio*. She was not Carmencita's aunt at all, but some distant relative harbored here for propriety's sake, that the orphaned little Señorita be provided with her duenna. She used a cane, was funereal in her eternal black, had deeply-sunken eyes that glittered, and was the girl's greatest burden in life. To have a chaperon! And one like Tia Juana! Carmencita, more American than Spanish by a long shot, experienced moments when she was sure there could be no law against poisoning people like Tia Juana.

Now she slid off her seat and in an instant vanished beyond the orange tree. The little old bent dame, beetle-like as she peered about, saw Romero and asked of him where the Señorita was. Romero, though he was most respectful, made his reply most brief. He had no idea.

So Tia Juana went back inside the house, and Carmencita emerged again from hiding and sat, fluffing her skirts, on the green bench. She smiled at Romero and he had enough happiness to last him twenty-four hours. She sat musing, looking up at the glittering windows of the Mountain House. They had never gleamed with such golden lights.

Presently Valdez came into the patio — her uncle Francisco de Valdez y Verdugo. He was small and dark and pompous; come to think of it, she thought, there was something almost beetle-like about him, too. Well, he and Tia Juana were cousins, weren't they? To be sure he was distinguished, handsome even in his small way, as arrogant as a bantam rooster, and there was far more behind that high brow of his, inside that large head of his, than Tia Juana could ever hold a conception of. He was a man, Carmencita had always thought who had little cause to love him but thoroughly distrusted him, who kept awake while other folks were sleeping, and not only kept awake but went places and did things—in the dark—and was always discreetly under his covers when the next day came.

He didn't see her and so she didn't speak; he called to Romero,

"Romero, where is the Señora?"

"One minute ago, Señor, she was here," answered Romero, speaking as Don Francisco had done, in Spanish. "She has gone into the house, to her room maybe."

"And my niece, Romero? She has not come this way yet tonight?"

Since the niece was not a dozen steps away, Romero waited respectfully for her to speak. For some reason—she was smiling just then and looked of a sudden overflowing with mischief—Carmencita did not say a word; rather—she drew a few inches farther back under the orange.

"Venga," commanded Valdez, and Romero obediently came closer. "Listen, Romero, and do what I tell you." Valdez was the great lord addressing a very lowly servant; kindly, yet dictatorial. "You will get on a horse now and ride toward Lost Valley. You will meet on the trail Señor Storm who is coming here. You will tell him that he is to say nothing about where he and I are riding tonight. You understand, Romero?"

"Si, Señor," said Romero.

"Bueno. Then hurry because he is coming soon." Valdez grew less magisterial, more human. "You are a good boy, Romero. Tonight I shall place one bet of twenty dollars for you. What it wins, you win."

Then, more like a bantam rooster than ever, he turned and marched with his quick, short, very important steps back into the house.

Carmencita sprang up and ran to the old servant.

"Romero! They are going then, my uncle and Tom Storm, up there? To the Black Jack Devlin place? They are!"

"Señorita!"

"Romero!"

"Yes, Señorita?"

"I am going, too! Yes, I am going!"

"Jesus, Maria y José!" gasped an astounded Romero.

"Yes! I will! I have just thought of something. There will be many men there tonight; it is Saturday night and there will be many, from the mines, from everywhere! And you shall go with me—and I will not be noticed! I will go, and no one is going to know! No one but you and me,Romero!"

Poor old Romero glanced wildly in all directions as though

he wanted to run away and was only seeking an open avenue of escape. She pinned him to the spot where he stood, doubly pinned him since she put her hand on his arm the while she looked both pleadingly and commandingly into his troubled but always adoring eyes.

"You hurry, Romero, and do what Tio Francisco said," she told him, and was very sweet in her own litte dictatorial way. "Then you saddle two horses and wait for me at the stable! Don't let anyone know."

Romero, perspiring freely, began wiping his forehead.

"But, Señorita—"

"You do what I tell you!" said Carmencita. Then she did as girls like Carmencita Valez used to do two hundred years ago; she stamped her foot. That done, she whisked about, set her fluffy white skirts billowing, and ran down through the end of the *patio* to duck into the house by another door.

"God won't let that happen," muttered Romero. "No, certainly not. Only," he added to himself, knowing full well that Carmencita generally did whatever she liked to do, "if He does, well He won't blame me very much, and He will watch over her. Me, too, I'll watch. Just the same, it's a crazy thing to do, and Don Francisco would skin me alive!"

Then he hurried away to do as he was bidden.

CHAPTER IV

UP AT THE Mountain House, Jock Hannigan began readying the main room. Here it was Saturday night again, and the wolves would be coming down from the higher-up country to howl. They'd come in from the North Star Mine, with young Bob Roberts leading the pack; they'd come streaming down from the Lady Luck Mine and the Golden Girl and the Big Bazoom. The house would be filled with them. And they would be heavy with money, good honest gold coins—to start in with. So he removed the covers from the tables, wiped off the bar, put on his spectacles and sleeve-protectors, curled up his old-fashioned bartender's mustaches that were like ram's horns, patted his bartender's hair that was oily and rippling back from a very high forehead in

curls like wavelets on a seashore, and as much as said by the way he stood and the way he looked, "Oh, hell, all right. Let 'em come. I can stand it if they can."

Consumptive Jimmy Weaver, clinging to his cigarettes like the drowning man to a straw, came in and sat at the piano; he looked one half dead and the other half asleep, and his hands were as languid as fading lilies—but from the contact of his finger tips with the ivories there was born music of such an order that it haunted.

Doc—nobody ever called him anything but Doc—came in. Slight and fair and middle-aged and innocent looking, but with a pair of alert brown eyes, he was as clever a man at dealing roulette or faro as ever crossed the Rockies headed in either direction. He went over to the piano and stood leaning against it, listening to Jimmy Weaver play.

These three—Jock Hannigan and Jimmy Weaver and Doc—were the three chief assistants here. Hannigan had been with Black Jack Devlin since Devlin's little daughter was six; he was a fixture and you couldn't think of the Devlins without him. And, when you got to know him, you couldn't conceive of Hannigan possibly surviving if he were deprived for twenty-four hours of the Devlins. Well, he might have lived, though unhappily, without Black Jack. But without Rosie, as he always called her? Never! She had long ago got her grappling irons into his heart every bit as securely as had Señorita Carmencita into old Romero's.

Jimmy Weaver coughed a couple of times, stuck the butt of his wheatstraw cigarette against the side of his instrument, and sang softly. He sang things like *Where Is My Wandering Boy Tonight* and *Comrades,* either because he liked that sort of thing best—or because the devil was in him and he took his sadistic pleasure from making Hannigan's and Doc's eyes all wet and blurry.

Men came from considerable distances to Black Jack's place. The Mines—that was a sweeping name to cover the length of the old Daylight Lode—spread-eagled out some twenty miles to the north. Beyond the Mines extended a stretch of barrens dotted with a few unimportant ranches, and still farther to the north, beyond the Tecolotes, was a rich cattle country centered by the little town of Red Dirt. Red Dirt, not far from Dark Valley where the wild Morgans

held forth, was a good forty-five or fifty miles from the Mountain House, yet men came from there, too.

Then, if you looked southward, you had to look far beyond Paradise Valley to come at anything vaguely resembling a human group. Down in the lower foothills was the lusty little town of Liberty. And though Liberty had its own places of amusement, men came from there, when in the mood, to have their fling at Black Jack Devlin's.

To the uninitiated it must appear odd that they would travel so many miles to a remote mountain resort. But there were reasons.

Most men liked young Bob Roberts. He was what they used to call a Go-getter. It was Hannigan who first remarked that Bob had quicksilver in his veins and wore a dynamo for a head. And still he was very young, in his early twenties, and yet he owned and operated the North Star—and that was because of two things: He was a mining engineer who knew a good deal about mines, practically as well as theoretically, and it resided within him to be a driving force, like a piston on the new eastern locomotives that pulled trains up over the mountains.

Bob Roberts, eager and electric, was the first man in that night. He had swung down out of his saddle from a sweat-wet horse, had slid a coin into the ready palm of Black Jack's stable boy, and had come striding along—to see Black Jack Devlin's daughter. Only of late, fighting with himself and in the end surrendering, he had acknowledged the one shining fact in all his world: He loved her.

He loved her and he wanted her, and he meant, all of a sudden, to have her. Before, she had seemed to him, young and deeply in love as he was, unattainable. Only tonight, as he rode headlong this way under the burgeoning stars, he had thought: "Sometime, somehow, some man is going to marry her! Some man, just a man! By God, why not—That girl is my girl!"

He knew that other men wanted her, that they were as hungry for her as he was, and that among them—or so he thought—was Tom Storm of Lost Valley. Right now, headlong and restless, what did that matter?

But he knew nothing of the Sundown Haveril, home-

ward bound from South America, headed straight to the Mountain House.

Young Bob Roberts went to the bar and had his drink set forth by Hannigan, then stood twirling his glass, looking around him, waiting. The men who had trooped in behind him, men from the North Star, stood up to the bar alongside and downed their drinks like shots, and ordered more. They, too, glanced around; perhaps they looked to see if anything was doing at any of the tables—or they, like him, may have been watching doors, thinking that Rose-alba would be coming.

Doc removed himself from the piano where Jimmy Weaver was disconsolately playing a sentimental Mexican love song, and took his place at the head of the roulette table. He set the little ivory ball whirring in its dizzy circle; when it dropped, clicking, into its appointed slot he regarded it with a queer, pained expression as though it had betrayed him, then set it whirring again. Meantime he stacked and restacked the chips; their dry clickings became a temptation: Any man who had roulette in his blood would fidget and strain, like a high spirited horse fighting its bit, and in the end would be drawn to the table.

Men began after the first and second drinks to trickle over. They said, "Hello, Doc," and he said, "Hello, Jim," or Pete or Sam or Walter or Joe; he knew them all and they all knew him. While dispensing hospitable greetings he kept the ball whirring. A few hours and he could go to bed.

Then Bob Roberts, who had never played roulette in his life, having no fondness for what he deemed a fool's game of sheer luck, came stalking over, walking on his boot heels, making an emphatic thumping on the floor. He said, "Dammit, Doc, I'm going to take a whirl at your game myself. Here's a twenty on the side that I take you for a ride."

All that Doc said was, "Hello, Bob. Come along, boys; place your bets. The little ivory ball is rolling and it's as round as a marble and as square as a die, and you've got to lay them down before the pill finds its nesting place. There's red and black, odd and even, columns and numbers—Twenty-seven it is, and Mr. Roberts wants seventy dollars. And here they are. Now, gents—the ball is rolling again—"

Bob Roberts swept in his winnings. He grinned at Doc and said,

"You know damn well, Doc, I never play this game. Tonight I just had a hunch; I wanted to make sure of what I knew already, that my luck was running high. I'm out."

He wore that grin of his all the time he was talking; it was an ingenuous grin and made him look like an urchin. With the frankly revealed flash of strong white teeth, with little laughing lines crinkling about his eyes, he was like a kid. He might have been in his adolescent teens.

Doc took them as they came; he knew them up hill and down dale. He, too, smiled. He said,

"Well, Mr. Roberts, if you want to make sure your luck is riding high, better try it the second time.—The little ball rolls, gentlemen, and fortune smiles—or does she giggle? Make the right guess and sleep on velvet. Guess wrong and go home broke.—How about it, Mr. Roberts? Still think your luck is going to stick with you tonight?"

Bob Roberts was turning away from the table, done with it. He stopped, slid a hand down into his pocket and brought up all he had. What with the seventy dollars which the table had just donated, he had about two hundred and fifty; he didn't know exactly. While the small ivory sphere was running races with itself around the rim of the bowl, he shoved all that he had onto the black.

"Thanks, Doc," he said. "I really do want to be sure tonight."

He won.

He scooped in his gleanings, shoved them into his pocket, not in the least interested in the fact that he had won some negligible dollars above three hundred—and went looking for Rose-alba.

But Rose-alba Devlin always play-acting for herself and for all others, delayed her entrance. She had peeked into the room twice, had scampered back to her own room, where she sat hugging her knees, rocking back and forth on the little bench before her triple mirrors, planning—

Men kept coming in, solitary riders and men in pairs and others in small companionable groups, most of them rough-garbed because they had only one way of dressing, be it Saturday, Sunday or Monday, some others in their

holiday store clothes. The logical thing to do was to step along to the bar the first rattle out of the box, to down a drink or two, to light a cigarette—then to look things over.

The room was half filled when Black Jack Devlin strolled in. He greeted his friends warmly; men who were merely acquaintances or perhaps came here for the first time, he nodded to politely, making them feel at home. His piercing black eyes tarried only briefly with such, but when he turned elsewhere it was as though he had peered into their pockets.

Little by little as the visitors warmed to the evening, having had a few drinks and having craned their necks every time a door opened, they gravitated to the tables. For the most part, poker was their meat. Next in popularity was the faro layout. Then a dice game and then roulette.

A couple of fellows from Red Dirt met a friend who had come up from Liberty. They gripped hands, drank together, swapped news. Thus, all without aid of telephone or telegraph wires, or Uncle Sam's mails, were communities a hundred miles apart brought in touch with each other. Just outside of Red Dirt there had been a disaster; a mine had caved in. Down in Liberty there had been a break in the monotony; the bank had been held up, the cashier killed, the place looted. Any man here, having an item of news freely given him, did his best with a comeback.

In this way word came up from Secret Valley of a new, utterly unexpected arrival. Things were in a bad way down in Secret Valley, the place impoverished and mortgaged to the hilt. An old foreman, Luke Oliver, kept it from falling to pieces. The Sundown Haverils had always owned Secret Valley; the Haverils of the last generation had let it go to the dogs.

But the last of the Haverils, a man who they said was a tramp and a bum, always off somewhere in the dirty, dark corners of the world, young Ross Haveril, had just turned up.

And that was news.

Rose-alba, at the door just before she staged her entrance, heard it. She wondered even then, preening herself, what the wild young Ross Haveril was going to be like. She didn't doubt that she'd see him soon. Didn't all men come

to the Mountain House? And didn't she know why most of them came?

Bob Roberts, restless, strolled out to the veranda that ran along three sides of the house, and walked the whole length, back and forth. "My luck is running high," he said, and went to the guard-railing and looked up from under the shed roof at the stars. He even stabbed at the stars with a thin streamer of cigarette smoke. "I'm going to play my luck. Tonight." And then he swung about and looked in at a window, to see whether Rose-alba had come.

There was no moon that night, so despite the clear skies and the stars, it was dark on the porch. Bob Roberts, leaning against the railing, saw men come up one or another of the three flights of steps from time to time; some of them he knew from their voices or from glimpses of them when they crossed the pathways of light streaming out from door or window.

He heard Tom Storm's voice, a deep, richly resonant voice not to be forgotten, and he saw Storm, who looked like a young Saxon giant out of an old romance, coming up to the front door. Storm was in high good humor, and there was a small man with him. Bob Roberts made out who that was—the dandified little rooster from Paradise Valley, Señor Francisco Valdez.

When two dogs that do not like each other meet, their stiff hairs bristle and the lips twitch back from bared teeth and they snarl. As Tom Storm was brushing by Bob Roberts, he saw who it was and came to a stop. The two regarded each other steadily. They didn't bristle and show their teeth; they didn't even snarl. Just the same, for an electric moment the air was charged with their hatred.

Then Storm laughed.

"So you're back again, are you, Roberts?" he said. "Don't you see what a damned fool you're making of yourself? Better get you off into a monastery."

Roberts didn't answer, though he stiffened from head to foot. Storm went into the house. Valdez at his side.

"Funny somebody hasn't killed Tom Storm long ago," thought Bob Roberts. His pulses were pounding; he re-

mained tense, with hard-clenched fists; he was holding himself in check, and it was hard work.

Through the windows he could see into the gaming room. She had not yet made her appearance. He walked restlessly up and down, lighting a cigarette, pinching it out, lighting another.

Men kept coming up to the porch, going inside, stacking up at the bar, greeting friends, turning to play or to watch or to come back to the bar. He stood back in a shadowy place, not just now of a mood to mingle with them.

Presently two figures stood quite close to him; they had come quietly up the west steps and had not seen him. Two men he took them to be, of course, since women did not come here and since both were dressed as men and since he could have no idea of little Señorita Carmencita masquerading so brazenly. Under her great, big, black hat, with her hair tucked into the high crown, she was just some slight Mexican youth who had come along with old Romero of Paradise Valley. For he recognized Romero. The two, like himself, were looking in at the window.

They were no slightest concern of his; they made no impression beyond the faint one upon the rim of his mind. He turned his eyes elsewhere. And then he heard her gasp; and heard her start whispering to Romero, and that drew his attention again. Strange that one man should be whispering to another out here.

Her words were: "Oh! Oh, Romero! Look! There she is! She is coming through the door yonder and—and— Oh!"

Queer, a whisper like that from one man to another, even from a youth who looked to be in his 'teens. But Bob Roberts did not waste a thought on either Romero or his young companion, for now he, too, saw Rose Devlin come into the gambling room, and his eyes and all his attention, like his heart, were for her alone.

She made one of her dramatic entrances. She stilled his pulse, then set it bounding. He wanted to rush straight to her, to take her into his arms, to say to her at last, "Rosalie, I love you. You've got to love me, too, or there is no meaning in life." She was dressed all in clinging green velvet; she looked like some sylvan creature that had just flashed in from the woods, from a place of green forests

and green pools. She was so lovely that the sight of her hurt him. And in an instant men started toward her—and big blond Tom Storm was at their fore, shoving others out of his way.

And then, not two seconds after she had entered, and before Bob Roberts had stirred out of his tracks, someone else came into the room and Roberts stared with all his might, at first incredulous, then with another quickening of his pulses.

Señorita Carmencita saw the newcomer, too, and clutched old Romero's arm, briefly forgetting Rose-alba, and asked swiftly,

"That one, Romero! Who is he? Tell me! I want to know!"

He was a young man, a big man, a man as big as Tom Storm and every bit as forceful and headlong. They had a saying about men like that in the mountains: "He wears dynamite in his boots." But where Storm was fair and blue-eyed, this man was dark, and the darkly pigmented skin which nature had given him had been so tanned and burned by southern suns that he came close to being black; a swarthy man with shaggy hair that needed cutting and was as black as jet, with jet-black eyes that flashed like black diamonds. He was shaggy all over, wearing an old, battered, black hat that was dusty and had holes in crown and brim, and might just now have been retrieved from an ash pile, and old, crumpled clothes that he might have slept in—and probably had—and big, lopsided boots which seemed never to have been cleaned since the day they were born. He hadn't shaved in two days, and his was the sort of black, bristly beard that should be reaped every twelve hours. And he came into the room as though a storm wind had blown him along.

Carmencita heard Bob Roberts mutter, "Lord love us! Old Ross come home again! Ross Haveril, of all men!"

Then Bob Roberts went hurrying into the house to greet an old friend. Carmencita watched him go; she said to Romero, "That is Bob Roberts, isn't it, Romero?" And then she said, "And that big, shaggy man, like a great St. Bernard dog, is Ross Haveril, come home again?"

It was at that moment that Ross Haveril, the last of the Sundown Haverils of Secret Valley, strong and violent men all of them, and Ross the strongest and most tempestuous, saw Black Jack Devlin's little daughter. He saw her, in that slithery green velvet gown of hers that made her look like some sort of a forest thing, for the first time.

He stopped and stared at her as a man might stare at any marvel in nature that he had come upon, chance-hit and all without warning. He hadn't taken off his disreputable old hat and didn't doff it now; it was shoved far back on his thick tangle of black hair, and the lights danced in his eyes. He stood with both big, hairy hands on his hips and disregarded everyone else in the room just to look at her.

And she saw him! There was no missing a man like him, storming in as he did, then looking at her like that.

And out on the porch Señorita Carmencita Valdez, the haughty little queen of the Valley of Paradise, saw them both—and saw Tom Storm, too, looking at the gambler's daughter and then, with a queer look on his face, at Ross Haveril; and she saw handsome young Bob Roberts, too, the mining man from the North Star, and noted how his eyes changed as they rested on Black Jack's girl.

Ross Haveril started to speak. His voice, unleashed, was just now like that of some jovial young bull. He said.

"Girl!" and started straight toward Rose-alba.

Tom Storm, not far from her, made a quick, involuntary movement and thus drew a glance from Ross Haveril. Haveril stopped dead in his tracks. Again he stared with all his might, at Storm now. On the instant they could all see that he had forgotten the girl.

"Storm!" he shouted, and sounded exultant. "Tom Storm! Why, you dirty, low-lived son of a skunk! You — — — —."

He named Tom Storm many names, none of them pretty. And then his big fists balled like war clubs, he bore down upon Tom Storm after the fashion of an avalanche.

And Storm, seeing him coming toward him, leaped forward to the meeting, bright, hard eagerness in his eyes—and so it was like one avalanche meeting another.

CHAPTER V

BLACK JACK DEVLIN took pride in the fact that he was what folk called a "gentleman" gambler. He didn't care the snap of finger and thumb how many of his guests killed one another or how they did it, but he did make a point of this: "Let them do it somewhere else, and not mess up my place."

That was one thing. Another was that he had seen how Ross Haveril had looked at Rose-alba, and had caught the unmistakable, ardent tone of Haveril's voice when he sang out, *"Girl!"*

Out on the porch, looking in, a tremendously thrilled Carmencita Valdez exclaimed,

"Romero! *Venga!* We are going inside now! Come, run, Romero!"

"No, Seniorita! No! For the love of God! You promised me—"

"They will not notice! Pouf! What is a promise! Anyhow they will not even see us! Come, Romero—"

Then she deserted him and ran along alone, and all that the poor old fellow could do—and he did it groaning and praying inwardly to his saints—was to follow. He had not the least doubt that Señor Valdez would skin him alive before morning—and that he would deserve the skinning.

By the time, and, little enough time did she require, when Carmencita Valdez darted into the big room, the place was in the wildest confusion. Men stepped promptly back, right and left, to give Tom Storm and this ragged newcomer all the room they needed. The blows the two men struck could be heard throughout the big room that had suddenly gone hushed. Both men had it in them to strike like kicking mules; both men, it became obvious at the outset, could stand up under mule kicks.

All that Ross Haveril had said was, "Storm! Tom Storm!" with the name bolstered up by a string of qualifying adjectives. All that Tom Storm had to say was, "You, Haveril? Why, hell take you! I've been hoping for this—"

If ever two lusty young men with murder lust in their

hearts were evenly matched, it was right here and right now. In case our Lady Luck chose to stand aside, merely watching like the little Mona Lisa that she can be at times, the battle might have lasted an hour, and the big room with its embellishments might have been a wreck. But if My Lady Luck kept out of it, Black Jack Devlin did not.

He stepped quietly to the bar; with his finger and with his eyebrows he made a gesture to Hannigan. Hannigan reached down and then, straightening up, handed something to his employer. It was an innocent enough looking instrument; something a baby might have played with. It was a something not over fourteen or sixteen inches long; it was not much thicker than Hannigan's thick thumb; it was a pliable thing encased in soft and shiny black leather. At one end, inside that satiny leather covering, it was loaded with buckshot.

Ross Haveril and Tom Storm, standing up to each other, were manfully trying to hammer each other's face into pulp to break each other's bones. Black Jack Devlin stepped smartly up behind Ross Haveril. He struck the one blow only, and did the thing coolly, scientifically and most efficiently. Ross Haveril, without knowing what had hit him, and with not so much as a moan, folded up, collapsed to the floor and lay there like a dead man.

"Cart him outside," said Devlin coolly. "Douse him with water, put him on his horse and send him home. Tie him down to his saddle, if he's hard-headed. And tell him he's not coming back here."

Bob Roberts came elbowing his way forward. For the moment he forgot that Devlin was the father of the girl he loved; he even forgot the girl herself though she was standing close by.

"Damn you, Devlin!" he said angrily. "That was a dirty trick to pull. This man is Ross Haveril, and he's a friend of mine, and a white man. If he wanted to tie into Tom Storm it was his business and for a good reason. Why, damn you—"

"Take it easy, Bob," said Black Jack, his voice quiet enough though his eyes grew hot. "This is my place and

I run it my way. If he's a friend of yours, get him out. And don't bring him back."

Bob Roberts stood glowering a moment. Then he beckoned to a couple of men who had ridden with him down from the North Star, and they bore the big, loosely limp body of the unconscious Ross Haveril out to the porch. A few men followed to see if he were dead. Along with them, unnoticed, pressed the slim, slight form of what might have been a Mexican youth, but was the little Señorita from the Hacienda del Paraiso. She wanted to be everywhere at once; it was like being at a circus, and she remembered having gone once in San Antone when she was a little girl; you didn't want to miss anything. So, after an uncertain moment, she followed the men bearing Ross Haveril out into the open air.

But Bob Roberts, never seeing her and all this while forgetting about Rose Devlin whom he loved with a deep and true and abiding love, came back into the gaming room. He stalked straight up to Tom Storm. He said, his voice growing thin because of the stress it bore,

"Storm, I've always thought you were all the things Ross Haveril called you. I wasn't sure, because I didn't know. I know now, because Ross said it. You're all the things he called you, and then some."

There was blood on Tom Storm's face, dribbling down from his battered lips, and there was a murderous rage tumultuous within him. More than that, he was in love with Rose Devlin, and he knew that Bob Roberts was crazy about her—and he didn't yet know which one of the two, himself or Bob Roberts, the melodramatic lady favored. So it was that he was in the right mood to take Roberts on as Ross Haveril's substitute.

Thus, before you could say Jack Robinson, a second fight started. Black Jack Devlin looked bored and disgusted. Things weren't going at all right tonight, not as they should go in a gentleman gambler's place.

Hannigan stepped out unobtrusively from behind the bar. An instrument that was a perfect twin to that which he had handed Devlin, the snaky thing in slick black leather, was in his competent right hand.

Rose-alba tried to stop him, but it was too late. Bob

Roberts and big Tom Storm met just about as Storm and Ross Haveril had met a minute or so before; they were in the mood to kill.

Hannigan, a soft-hearted man, sighed. Then, having a job to do, he swung his blackjack up and brought it softly down. It cracked nicely against Tom Storm's skull, just in the right place, low down at the back and not too low—and not too hard—and Storm, like his old enemy Ross Haveril, folded up and went sweetly to sleep.

Altogether, though the time required for it was about two minutes and a half, hardly more, they had quite a time of it that night at Black Jack's place. And the—so to speak—success of the social function resided not alone in the fact that a lethal weapon in Black Jack's skilful hands and its alter ego in soft-hearted Hannigan's had laid low the two battling devils who asked no better than to tear each other apart. The things that counted lay outside of this straightforward field of endeavor and accomplishment. There were certain other factors.

Bob Roberts alone had been left unscathed. He looked at Black Jack Devlin as though he'd like nothing better than to rend him limb from limb. Black Jack returned his look, then shrugged and thereafter smiled and touched up his needle-pointed mustaches. Roberts, the blood in his face, swung about and went along outside to take care of his old friend Haveril. At the door he did think of something, and swung on his heel to look back at Hannigan. It was as much as to say, "I'm kind of rattled but thanks, Kid. Thanks you cracked down on Storm instead of on me."

A good many of the others in the room trooped outside, some interested mildly, some much more than mildly, in following the story up. One of them was Rose Devlin. Shoulder to shoulder with her was what appeared to be a young Mexican, his floppy black hat down over his eyes. Those eyes, by the way, were as bright as newly sharpened daggers while they took full stock of Rose-alba. Then they flashed away with so many other things to take stock of. There was handsome Bob Roberts; there was Tom Storm with whom he had striven because of an old friend; there was that old friend himself, Ross Haveril.

There were, oh, so many things!

There was an old Castilian saying:

"Today is today, and yesterday was yesterday, and now we know all about them. But what about tomorrow?"

CHAPTER VI

SECRET VALLEY in the soft starlight was a place of ineffable beauty. But then, whether moonlit or sun-drenched, or under a darkening summer thunderstorm, it was always as lovely a valley as the Happy Valley of Rasselas. At its northern end were cliffs where wild waterfalls spilled down in white froth like wind-blown lace. And there were deep dark pools where quick trout lived, fern-fringed greenish bowls of mountain water rimmed with big boulders and shaded by laurels and aspens and buckeyes. The little river —they called it Sundown Creek—rippled crookedly down the valley floor, and there was just enough timber left standing to make the whole valley look like a park.

But of all this tonight Ross Haveril saw little or nothing. He had returned to his birthplace only today. He had wandered about for a few hours, with rage getting a strangle hold on him, gripping him by the throat, choking him until the tears almost came into a pair of hard, hot eyes. Then he had stepped along to Black Jack Devlin's place—

He had stepped along to do a bit of forgetting for the one night. It hurt, coming back after a dozen or more years, and seeing what had happened to Secret Valley. The cliffs and waterfalls and creek and trees had lost none of their loveliness—but the fences were down, posts were rotting, and the old house was a battered shell that somehow made him think of an old coffin from which the body which had occupied it had just now been removed.

So he had wanted to go to the Mountain House and wash the taste out of his mouth with a few hard-liquor drinks, and out of his brain with a game—and all without expectation he had come upon Tom Storm! Tom Storm, of all men!

But here Ross Haveril was, back again in Secret Valley. He was in the house. Someone had carted him home; had put him down on the old green sofa in the parlor—or what

used to be a parlor; it looked now as though sheep had been kept in it.

He reared up on an elbow, then sank back again with a groan. Holy Cow, what a thunderbolt someone had swung to do this to him! He shook his shaggy head, though gently; he surged up on his elbow again, being a man who always had been hard to keep down, and looked into the concerned eyes of an old, old friend.

"Why, Bob! Bob Roberts!"

"Hello, Ross," said Bob Roberts.

Ross Haveril got his legs off the sofa, got his big feet down on the floor. He made an effort and stood up. He stood there, swaying slightly, looking like a wicked old grizzly bear.

"I'm home," he said. "Home again, for the second time. And what a hell of a home! And just now I thought I was up at Black Jack Devlin's place—and that I ran into that cross between a sewer rat and a boa constrictor that folks call Tom Storm. And now, here I am again." He ran a grimy hand through his rough shock of long, tumbled hair, hair like a horse's mane. "What in hell did Storm do to me anyhow, Bob? Shoot me? Or drop a ton of bricks on me?"

"I didn't know you ever knew Storm," said Roberts.

By now Ross Haveril was pretty sure of his balance, standing. He went across the room, and all the while he still resembled a lumbering old bear, and pawed into a dilapidated Gladstone bag; he dragged out a quart bottle of southern rum and came back to offer it to Bob. Bob, for old times' sake, drank sparingly. Ross Haveril stuck the bottle mouth into the Haveril mouth and drank as though he were gulping down a glass of water.

Then he pitched the bottle into a corner. He reached out both big, hairy hands and clamped them down like grappling hooks on Roberts' shoulders. An instant later, with a rumbling laugh like summer thunder, he dragged his old friend to him, squeezed him mightily in arms which were surely created for the prize ring—and then set Roberts free.

"Why, damn you, Bob," he sang out in that lusty voice of his that you could hear a mile against the wind, "nothing has made me as glad in seven years as to see you! But you ask, 'Do I know Tom Storm?'"

All the laughter went out of him. His great, hairy fists rolled up into war clubs that might have been made of South Sea mahogany, touched up artistically with hairs of a cocoanut.

"I guess you know him all right," admitted Roberts.

"I ran into him down in Guatemala; that was a good ten years ago. We ganged up; I took a liking to the devil. We went down into Nicaragua together, both young, both dead broke, both looking for fun and whatever it is that young fellers look to find at the foot of the rainbow.

"And we kept on going. We stuck together for four years. Down in South America it was that we made our killing; high up in the Andes where the silver mines were breaking out like a rash. We horned in where Americans weren't particularly wanted; we fought it through together; we had one beautiful hell of a time, and we came out on top, with a hundred thousand in cash and a string of mining concessions. And then Tom Storm, damn his hide, rapped me over the head with a crowbar one night, grabbed the hundred thousand and— Well, I never knew where he went, never heard of him, never saw hide nor hair of him until tonight. I guess, Bob, you can understand how glad I was to come up with him!"

"He's like that," said Roberts. "I never caught him redhanded, but that's the sort he is."

"You haven't told me yet how in blue blazes he put me out the way he did up there at the Mountain House?"

Bob Roberts hesitated a bit. Also, being young, a hot flush came up into his tanned cheeks. He didn't like to say anything against Rosalie's father. But Bob was forthright, and facts were facts, and Ross Haveril was a friend. He and Ross had been inseparables in the long ago when Ross was the young heir to Secret Valley and when Bob, an old prospector's son, was dreaming dreams of college and a course in mining engineering. Young Bob had subsequently gone to school at Golden in Colorado while Ross Haveril had tramped south and, it would seem, had pretty much gone to the dogs.

"It wasn't Storm who hit you," said Roberts at lost. "It was Black Jack Devlin. After all, I don't know as you could

blame him. He doesn't invite rough and tumble murder fights up at his place. He crowned you with a blackjack."

"Why, damn him!" roared Ross Haveril. "In another shake I'd have had Storm down on his back, pounding the merry hell out of him—pounding a hundred thousand dollars out of him if he's still got it—and then Devlin puts me away and Storm goes off laughing!"

"Here's the rest of it," said Roberts, and told him how he had tied into Storm, and would have probably been beat to a pulp, and how Hannigan, emulating his employer, had stepped up and tapped Tom Storm over the head, bringing him down cold.

It was good news, and Ross Haveril, his anger blown away, shouted with laughter. Further, he clapped his old friend on the back with such Gargantuan cordiality that Bob Roberts staggered under his hand.

"It's all right," laughed Haveril, all at once in high good humor. "Now that I've come up with Tom Storm he can't get so far away that I don't dig him out again. Let's forget him. We'll have another drink to wash the taste of him out of our memories—"

He looked about for his bottle, ruefully stared at the shattered fragments glistening in the wetness of its shed contents, and laughed again. Then he flashed from one mood to another.

"That girl!" he said, and sounded eager. "She'd knock your eye out as far as you could see her! Who is the little trick, Bob, and will I find her up at the Mountain House at any time?"

For the second time Bob Roberts had to hesitate. But again, with facts being facts, he spoke straight to the point.

"She is Rose Devlin, Black Jack's daughter. He'd kill a man for looking at her in the wrong way. And— Damn it, Ross, you leave her alone!"

Ross Haveril's brows, thick and black and tufted, shot up and stayed up while his eyes strove to read whatever lay in his friend's mind—and in his heart and soul, too.

"So it's like that, is it, Bob?" said Haveril.

"Yes. It's that way."

"And she? This Rose Devlin? She's that way, too? And what about Tom Storm? Does he count in?"

Bob's jaw hardened. "He wants her, Storm does. He wants everything. Some day— But look here, Ross. You've just merely seen her for the first time tonight; why, man, you haven't even spoken a word to her! She doesn't mean anything to you—"

"How do you know that?"

"She can't! Not when you've just got a sight of her and nothing more! Keep off, Ross!"

Ross stood staring at him queerly another moment or two, then began laughing and came over and clapped Bob on the shoulder again.

"Let's step outside on the porch," he said. "Let's get out into the fresh air a minute; my head's splitting. And it breaks a man's heart to be in this damned dead and moldy house! It used to be— Oh, hell, let's get outside for a breath of air." Then as they went out he said, "The place seems deserted, but I saw a couple of horses and a cow or two— and somebody must have plowed the old orchard last spring—"

"It's Luke," said Bob. "Old Luke Oliver. He's stayed on, all these years."

"Say, that's fine! Good old Luke Oliver! When I was a kid— But where is he now? I haven't seen hide nor hair of him, and I blew in this afternoon."

"I wouldn't know," said Bob. "Looks like he's sort of losing heart: I guess Luke, like the rest of us, dodges out from under when things get to bearing down too hard."

Ross Haveril stooped toward him; in the starlight he strove to see the expression on Bob's face.

"Bearing down hard on Luke?" he demanded. "What?"

"He's had hard luck, Ross. He's about to lose the place; he's mortgaged up to the hilt— With Tom Storm, damn him, holding the mortgage."

"Mortgage? What mortgage? Luke's losing his place— What place?"

"Why, this one. Secret Valley. What did you suppose?"

Again Ross Haveril ran his heavy fingers through his dense shock of hair. In an oddly quiet voice he said,

"Luke's got Secret Valley mortgaged? How come, Bob? Who in hell does the Valley belong to anyhow?"

"Why, to Luke Oliver, of course.—You knew that, didn't you, Ross?—Do you mean to tell me—"

"Somehow I got the notion tangled up inside my head that Secret Valley belonged to me," said Ross Haveril.

For a little while they didn't say anything; there wasn't much need of words unless a man wanted details and explanations which lay behind the stark facts themselves. Already Ross Haveril understood that the home to which he had just returned, the home which he believed his—with Luke Oliver a faithful retainer and caretaker—belonged not to him at all, but to Luke Oliver.

In their silence they looked not at each other but out through the night, across the rippling fields and meadows of the upper end of Secret Valley. They saw the old orchard—Ross and Bob had spent many a lazy, dreamful boyhood hour there, eating green apples, robbing birds' nests, planning on running away to become pirates or kings of desert islands or masters of diamond mines down in invitational Africa. The old apple trees were crooked; their limbs looked like outstretched arms—and arms like that might either hug you close in all tenderness or grab you like tentacles and squeeze the life out of you.

There came a slow, heavy tread in the bare, hard-packed yard. They made out a man's figure. He was tall; his face was a mystery under his broad-brimmed hat.

"It's Luke Oliver," said Bob in an undertone. "He saw our light; he has come down from the old bunkhouse, where he still lives, to see what the hell."

Luke came slowly on. As he put foot to step to come up to the porch, he lifted his head slightly. What with the starlight and the light of the lamp inside the house, coming murkily out of a window which hadn't been washed in many a year, it was just possible to make out a thin face, a mustache that was like horns turned down, and a pair of eyes.

Luke stopped at the top step and took off his hat and scratched his head. There was a bald spot about three inches in diameter; surrounding it and hanging straight down were sparse salt-and-pepper hairs.

Luke cleared his throat. Then he said,

"Hello, Bob. That's you, ain't it?" And then he was still

a moment, and then in the same soft-toned voice, he said, "Hello, Ross. That's you, ain't it?"

Ross didn't say anything right away. But Bob Roberts said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

Slowly Luke lifted a thin, sinewy hand, offering it to young Haveril. He said again, "Well, hello, Ross." Then, when Ross's hand at last went out to engulf Luke's, Luke went on to say, "Looks to me like rain. There's a thunderstorm boiling up tomorrow, I'd bet a man.—Say, Ross, you been away quite a spell now, ain't you? How's everything?"

"Fine," said Ross Haveril. "Fine, Luke. How're things with you?"

"Rotten," said Luke in that still, soft voice of his. "Let's go inside and squat. Things is sort of quiet out here now, Ross, but we can have a game of checkers—or if Bob here feels like it, we'll make it three-handed stud."

Ross said, his heavy voice sounding controlled, under pressure,

"Bob tells me this place is yours now, Luke. Secret Valley."

"Sure," said the quiet Luke Oliver. "It's been mine for ten years. Didn't you know? Or didn't you care?"

"How come?" said Ross Haveril. "Me, I'd sort of got the crooked notion in my head that this was the Haveril place."

"Oh, my eye and Pete's red sow!" said Luke, and his voice almost warmed up.

Perhaps he was going on to say something more, man of few words though he was, but just then there came to their ears the soft throb of hoofbeats crossing the meadow, coming this way from Sundown Creek which they could see in places flashing darkly in the starlight.

"There ain't been so damn many folks out this way in seven years," said Luke Oliver. "Company, Ross."

"Who?" said Ross sourly. "I don't want to see anybody. Just you, Luke, to get this straight; just Bob Roberts for old times' sake. Who, Luke?"

Luke hadn't the faintest idea and didn't care to guess until the rider came so close that he could recognize the horse.

"It's somebody from Paradise Valley, from the Valdez ranch," he said, and sounded mystified. "First time any

Valdez rider ever come over here.— Hell, let's go inside and play checkers. Remember, Ross? That night you flew off the handle and went places and never come back until now —must have been ten-twelve-fourteen years ago—you and me was playing checkers. I had two kings against your one. You had a chance—"

He was already leading the way into the house. Ross fell into step and Bob Roberts, with a look over his shoulder at the oncoming rider, wondering that Luke could make out what horse it was at that distance and in that lack of light, followed them. So the three re-entered the dilapidated parlor.

"What sort of a damned bozo have you turned out to be anyhow, Luke," demanded young Haveril. "A crook?"

"Me, I was wondering about you, too, Ross," said Luke.

Bob Roberts, having looked back over his shoulder said, "Your visitor is Valdez himself. I saw him tonight at the Mountain House. Valdez from Paradise Valley. He was with Tom Storm. They're friends, Ross."

Ross Haveril swung about toward the door.

"If this gent is a friend of Tom Storm's," he said, "you just watch me boot him out of Secret Valley." His voice hardened; a sort of jeer came into it as he added, "Even if Luke has stolen the valley here, you just watch me boot any friend of Tom Storm's."

"Ross," said Luke Oliver, and they could scarcely hear his low-spoken words, "you're a damn jackass that ever was, that hasn't got sense enough to dig inside a baked potato. I wonder, times, how you can get your boots on without somebody helping you. I wonder how you can feed yourself. Now, Ross, you keep still just like mice do, or I'll bat your biscuit off."

Luke, so softly spoken, was the one at the door to greet Señor Valdez.

CHAPTER VII

VALDEZ, leaving his horse with dragging reins, came up the steps and knocked. Invited to come in, he stepped into the room shadowly lighted by two coal oil lamps with smoky chimneys and one smoky lantern. His bright, small,

shrewd eyes took stock of the three men, Bob Roberts and Luke Oliver whom he knew—Ross Haveril whom he wanted to know.

"Señor," he said, and bowed toward the shaggy, quite disreputable looking Ross Haveril. "I have not the honor of knowing you, yet I came to speak a word or two with you. May I do so?"

"You're Valdez from Paradise Valley," said Ross Haveril grumblingly. "And you want to talk with me? Well, why not? It's a free country. Shoot."

Than Señor Valdez you would have found it hard to produce another man more given to the extremes of courtesy, of affability, of smoothness and oiliness; and you would have had to go a long way, even in a rough country, to have found a man the equal of Ross Haveril in a sort of primitive roughness. Brutish he was not, but as far as his bearing went that was about the best that could be said of him. He seemed to take an animal delight in running counter to all the nice conventions by which Valdez steered through all weathers.

The two, therefore, though almost nose to nose, were as far apart as the poles.

After Haveril's blunt words Valdez stood a moment, looking uncertain. But there was an eloquence about the man even when his lips, as now, were tightly compressed. His whole small body, shoulders particularly, and his hands, and his eyes, spoke for him. He looked from Ross Haveril to the others, and back again at Ross. It was quite as though he had said,

"But, my dear sir, it is with you that I wished to speak. The matter is one of privacy. Cannot we be alone?" All that without a word spoken.

Haveril grunted. Both Bob Roberts and Luke Oliver, however, moved toward the door.

"I want to take Bob out to the barn and show him a new colt I've got," said Luke. "We won't be gone more than ten minutes."

Valdez made them one of his gentle bows. It said as clearly as though he had voiced the words, "Thank you, Mr. Oliver. And thank you, too, Mr. Roberts. You are being most kind."

Luke took up the lantern, and he and Bob, two good friends, went along to the old bunkhouse where Luke had lived when he was foreman over Secret Valley, where he preferred to keep on living after he became owner. He dug out a bottle and they sat down.

Meantime two other riders had come down from the Mountain House into Secret Valley. They rode quietly, stopping in the dark at the edge of the pines a hundred yards from the house. They had seen Valdez go into the house; they saw the lantern bobbing away as Luke Oliver carried it.

"For the love of God, Señorita!" pleaded old Romero.

Carmencita Valdez swung lightly down from her saddle.

"I am going to peek, I am going to listen, I am going to eavesdrop—I am going to find out a lot of things, Romero!" she said swiftly. "You just wait here with the horses!"

He kept on pleading, but he stayed where he was and watched her running on to the house.

And in the house the unshorn barbarian that was Ross Haveril was growling.

"Well, Valdez, what's on your mind? I don't know you, I don't know that I care to, I don't like your looks and I don't like your ways and I don't like your friends. So make it snappy or get the hell out of here."

Valdez smiled.

"You are Señor Haveril, *no?* One time you owned—or at least your people, your father—owned Secret Valley. Now you have lost it. You have come back here—and look at what you have come back to! A place of ruins!"

"Why, damn you—"

"And," continued Valdez, the hint of a sneer on his lips as his eyes trailed over the uncouth, raggedly clothed figure of his host, "you come back home with no more money in your pockets than you had when you ran away, a boy of a dozen years! I think, my friend, that to you a hundred dollars would look as big as the moon in August!"

"You damned little rabbit!" said Haveril and took an angry step forward.

But Valdez, without stepping backward, merely kept on smiling, and spoke evenly, suggesting with word and tone and expression alike that it would be just as well if young,

headlong Haveril held his horses and listened. And Haveril did listen.

Valdez had measured his man, and through a lifetime of doing that sort of thing he made more hits than misses. He said, still very polite yet with a certainty of tone that was as good as the point of a knife blade,

"I'll not take up your time, Señor. You are without money, no? As for me, I have money in great plenty. Now we come to this thing: I saw how you greeted that Tom Storm of Lost Valley, and I heard what you said to him! *Bueno!* If you need money, come to me. I am to be found at Paradise Valley. And you will just tell me all that you know about Señor Storm—and why you called him the things which you did call him—and what it is that he has done that made you feel it would be—how shall I say it? —a nice thing if you killed him."

"Oho!" said Ross Haveril, and then laughed. And after that he smote the little don on the shoulder so that Valdez sagged at the knees.

Having started laughing, it seemed that Ross Haveril would never stop. Little Señorita Carmencita on the porch, peering in just as she had done up at the Mountain House, stared, fascinated; he frightened her, he queerly disturbed her.

"Let's have it all," said Haveril. "Just what's eating you?"

"Eating me?" For a moment the little hidalgo rooster was puzzled. Then he understood and pointed up his mustaches. "Señor," he said with dignity, "there is nothing at all in the world that eats me. *Nada!* But there are things which make me hungry, like a good Spanish sherry before supper, to know other things. And I pay for my Spanish sherry. And you would like some money; you could buy a new hat, new boots, new clothes—and you could go somewhere where you could buy fine wines and have a pretty girl for company."

Ross Haveril had stopped laughing, but there was a bright gleam of interest in his eyes.

"You told me to listen, Señor Don Diablo de Valdez," he said mockingly. "Bueno. I listen. Shoot the works. Again I ask, what's nibbling at your vitals?"

Again Valdez didn't understand the words, but it was clear that he got their drift. He shoved a hand into his

pocket and brought out several golden twenties. He had meant to stake them at Black Jack's tables tonight, but other matters had come up.

He fingered the coins. Five of them he held out in his palm.

"Here are one hundred dollars. I am glad to have you accept them. And when you have done so, all I ask is that you tell me everything you know about that Tom Storm."

Ross Haveril looked at the money, looked into the little man's eyes, looked again at the money—and then at his own clothes. He regarded his sloppy, lopsided boots; considered his battered coat and trousers, he twirled his unlovely hat and considered it. He remarked with great gravity,

"You look to me, Señor Don Diablo, like something that has just crawled up out of hell. You are trying to tempt me—trying to buy my soul!" Then he started laughing again, and what a laugh that man had, as good as the bellowing of a young, lusty bull.

Dim as the light was which the smoky lamps gave, those gold coins gleamed warmly. Gold is and always has been a pretty thing, even before men had thoughts of money.

Suddenly Haveril put out his hand; he scooped the coins into his palm and shot them into his pocket. As he did so he squared his enormous shoulders.

"A hundred dollars, Valdez. That's a lot of money—sometimes. Take me: I've known the time when I wouldn't cross the road for a drop-in-the-bucket like that. Take me: I've known the times when I've thought I'd run down to hell for half of it! It's now you're up and now you're down—and that's life, eh, *amigo? La vida es un sueño, no?* And sometimes, like tonight, we dream big dreams!"

"You are very right, Mr. Haveril. So—tell me!"

"Bueno," said Ross Haveril. "You have paid me and so I'll earn some of my money. A whole hundred dollars! Man alive, that's real money when you're down and out!"

"Yes. Sure for sure, I know," said Valdez, busy with his mustaches.

"All right," said Haveril. "I'll tell you a thing or two. I know Tom Storm. He's a damned thief. I was with him in South America. We were pardners. We made some money.

He whanged me over the head when I wasn't looking for it and ran out with the cash. And that's the story."

Valdez cogitated. He said after a while,

"Yes. And that was how long ago?"

"About six years," said Haveril.

"Aha! Ahaha! And now will you tell me, Señor, about how many *pesos* this thief ran away with?"

"It amounted to a hundred thousand dollars in round numbers."

A queer smile, one that a stranger could make nothing of, came fleetingly to the thin lips under the Valdez mustache.

"So! And then our Señor Tom Storm came here. With so much money in his pocket. And he bought the Lost Valley. And he— But never mind." He stopped smiling; his eyes narrowed. "You would swear to all this in a law court?"

"Hell, yes," said Haveril. "Why not? Only what good would it do? And, besides, I don't think that this little affair of ours will ever drag along as far as getting into court."

"One more thing I will ask," said Valdez, and looked downright wistful. "You were with this dog whose name is Storm for some years; you must know him well. Do you know of other evil deeds of his?"

It had become very clear that Valdez was playing a hunch, and that he was out to secure information to make things hot—very, very hot—for Tom Storm. Haveril began to wonder about the nigger in the Valdez woodpile.

And, out on the porch, peering in through the unwashed windows, the little Señorita Carmencita Valdez, tremendously interested, was wondering about Ross Haveril. She thought, "If somebody gave him a bath and shaved him and bought him some nice clothes and cut his hair and— and tamed him, he would be handsome; as handsome as some wild pagan god!" And she kept on thinking: "My uncle is a great liar, and that is a thing I have found out tonight. And I have found out other things—and I have seen that girl. And Mr. Roberts is c-r-azy about her—and so is Tom Storm that is trying to make love to me! And so is this pagan god, this Haveril man. And me— *Vamos a ver!* Let's keep some eyes open and let's see a lot of more things!"

Inside, Haveril took his time answering Valdez's question. At last he said, speaking thoughtfully,

"You want the deadwood on Storm, eh? Let's see: That means that he has done something to you; you want to get back at him; you can't quite see the way; you need help." He punctuated his remark with a grunt like an Indian's, then like an Indian was for a moment stoically silent. "What's in the wind, Valdez?" he demanded abruptly.

Valdez shrugged.

"Am I paying you? Or are you paying me?"

Ross Haveril jingled the gold coins in his pocket and let his hardened features relax in a broad smile.

"Sure. You're right. Well, *Señor Gallo,* I can't tell you any more of Tom Storm than I've already told you. I've a notion he may have murdered a few men in his time, taking life in his stride, but I can't be sure; I only know it would be like him. And now, have you got your hundred dollars' worth?" Out on the porch little Carmencita was thinking shuddersomely, "But these men are like wild beasts! All of them. My uncle, too!"

Valdez spoke more directly to the point than he had done before.

"Haveril," he said, addressing the man as he was accustomed to speak to any of his servants, Indians and half-breeds for the most part, "I have received, as you say, my money's worth. But I shall speak with you again. Perhaps I shall even help you to reacquire your old home here, the Secret Valley. But of all these things we are going to talk again."

He turned toward the door as though to go, but Haveril saw that the man was not yet ready to end their talk. Valdez hesitated, hung on his heel, and turned back.

Ross Haveril was grinning, looking at him expectantly like a man at the theatre waiting the next development.

"Get it out of your system, old boy," he said, off-handedly disrespectful of the Valdez dignity. "What's still festering in your mind?"

"I saw you fight with Storm," said Valdez, and for the first time his utterance was thin and cold and crisp. "If you should fight with him again sometime—if you should happen to—if you should maybe hit him so hard that you killed

him— Well, I would anyhow keep on being your friend. You understand me? *Bueno, y buenos noches.*"

At that he went out; went so suddenly that his little niece, all attentive ears and enormous eyes, was almost caught spying on him. She didn't dare run down the steps into the yard; she scurried along the porch instead and to its darkest corner where she stopped, since she could go no farther without jumping down in the dark, she didn't know how many feet.

Ross Haveril followed his departing guest as far as the door; stood a moment looking thoughtfully after him as he went to his horse, then still stood there, thinking.

He and Carmencita Valdez, whom he had never seen and of whom he had never even heard, were not six feet apart. She was trembling so that she was conscious of her knees touching throbbingly. She wanted to jump and run—and she wanted to stay—and she was thinking, though in a blind and troubled fashion, "I want to know this man! I want to talk to him, to have him talk to me. He is different—and my small little life has never had anything different in it!"

Then Ross Haveril, who should have turned right to go back into the house, turned left. He was simply going to the end of the porch, to look down into the orchard again. And he saw a girl standing there. She had pulled her hat off and her hair had tumbled down about her shoulders. She was shrinking back into the dark, making her tiny self tinier.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN SHE KNEW that he had discovered her, she was frightened stiff. And then she did try to jump down over the railing, no longer caring how far she was going to fall. But he was quicker than she; his strength was ten times hers. He caught her by the arm and dragged her back. Then she started battling, striking at his face, scratching—

He whipped her hands behind her back, held her two wrists in one of his big hands and scooped her up into the crook of his arm.

"We'll carry you into the house to see what you look like by lamplight," he said.

She began to scream, calling to Romero, but already Haveril had carried her across the threshold and had kicked the door shut; as he put her down he clamped a hand over her mouth.

"You keep still," he commanded her. "No more yelling. If you let out one more yip I'll get a great big butcher knife out of the kitchen and—and I'll cut your hair off! I'll make me a hair rope out of it. Most likely, too, I'll get some soot off the stove and blacken the end of your nose. And, young woman, there are even worse things that can happen to a young, beautiful and defenseless girl— Or are there?"

Then she saw that he was laughing at her, making fun of her, and suddenly she was no longer in the least afraid but tremendously angry. She started to make her favorite gesture—to stamp her pretty little, high-arched foot in its attractive, high black boot and to talk like the Queen of Sheba. He had no more than released her when she began this sort of thing. His answer was prompt and emphatic, and it silenced her: Again he scooped her up, into both arms this time, and little Miss Carmencita was kissed as she had never been kissed before—as she had never even dreamed a girl could get kissed.

"Now," he said and glowered at her, "will you be good?"

He stood back and looked at her—and Carmencita Valdez, on this night of new things, got herself looked at as she had never been looked at before.

Ross Haveril whistled, and a long, soft, altogether flattering whistle it was.

"You're lovelier than a forest fire!" he told her.

She saw instantly that it wasn't going to do her the least good to be high and mighty with him. So she did the other thing. She clasped her hands and pressed them against her genuinely fluttering breast, and pleaded with him.

"Please!" she begged. "Oh, please! Just let me go. I have been crazy and now I am sorry and scared and— Let me go!"

"Who the devil are you?" he wanted to know.

She shook her head violently, and wasn't play-acting a bit.

"Virgin Santissima!" she gasped. "You must not ask! It

must never be known! I would die of shame—and besides, they would kill me!"

"Oho!" said Ross Haveril and started laughing again while she thought that he would always be laughing or storming and fighting—or making terrible love! She was rubbing the back of her hand across her mouth.

"You have been very—very rude to me," said Carmencita, and rolled her r's at him—and came dangerously close to rolling her eyes at him too, for he did thrill her. Even though he scared her, he thrilled her and she kept on thinking, "If they just washed him good and cut his hair—"

"I don't have to ask any more who you are," chuckled Haveril. "The way you talk, the way you act—and that little hop-o'-my-thumb Valdez was here just now— You're his daughter, I'll bet a man, and you came to snoop."

She lifted her chin at him.

"You are c-razy. Because he has no daughter at all. And besides we of my family do not do such vulgar things like that— We do not *snoop.*"

Haveril tipped his head sidewise, sizing her up afresh. He asked soberly,

"Want to get kissed again?"

She flashed her eyes at him, striving girlfully to keep her hot color down.

"I would rather be dead! I would rather be chopped up in pieces."

"Well, I don't much blame you," said Haveril, and rubbed his bristly jaw. "But look here: You belong somehow to the Paradise Valley outfit. You're either Valdez's daughter or granddaughter or grandmother or second cousin, or something like that. You tell me, and I promise not to kiss you again tonight, and maybe I won't even chop you up in pieces."

"You let me go!" said Carmencita, desperate.

"Luke Oliver is going to make mince pies tomorrow," said Haveril, and sighed and looked unhappy.

"You great big fool!" said Carmencita. "What do you talk to me like that for?"

"I'll have to chop you up after all," said a sorrowing Haveril. "We'll use you for mince meat. And—"

"Very well! If I tell you, will you let me go? And will you

be a gentleman, or anyhow as much a gentleman as you can, which won't be very much, and not tell anyone that I came here tonight? Never and never?"

"You remind me of a new crescent moon I saw not long ago out at sea," said Haveril. "And you make me think of a white and pink orchid I stopped to look at down in South America. And you're a funny kid and I'm going to tell you a very great secret. Tonight I went to the Mountain House and I saw Black Jack Devlin's little devil daughter—and I fell head over heels in love with her, all at first sight, mind you!"

"Uf!" said a disdainful Carmencita Valdez. "A girl like her! But yes, you would do that—a man like you!"

"And now you drop down here like a brand new star from heaven—and all at first sight, mind you, here I am falling in love with you! What's happened to this part of the world since I went traveling?"

"So!" She was scornful. "It is like that! You see a girl and you fall terribly in love with her—and then you see the next girl and you break your heart some more— And when you were on the ocean and there were baby moons, and when you were in South America and there were orchids—and all the time there was some girl—"

"Why, you're jealous already!" shouted Ross Haveril, and forgot his new promise, and scooped her up the third time and kissed her. This time he got his face slapped good and hard.

"See! We're getting along!" he chuckled.

"I am going now," said Carmencita, "and I hate you and I am never going to see you again. Never and never. And I am not going to tell you who I am or anything."

He surprised her then. He stepped swiftly to the door and opened it for her.

"I broke my promise, so I'll let you go. But I'll find you again and very soon—and it will be over in Paradise Valley. And as you go, Kid, think of this: There were orchids and there were new moons—but I never fell in love until tonight!"

"Do you think I'll believe—"

"But it's true! And I fell twice! With Black Jack's daughter and with the flower of Paradise Valley! And now you'd

better run along and let me figure this out: How can I get both of you? Or will it boil down to where I want just one of you? And which one?"

And he started to laugh again—and Carmencita fled.

When Bob Roberts and Luke Oliver returned to the house, which they did on the heels of the girl's flying departure, they found Ross Haveril striding up and down, his hands jammed into his pockets, a thoughtful scowl dragging his brows down. At first he didn't notice them; when he did he swung about and demanded,

"There was a girl here a minute ago. She's as pretty as the devil. I'm pretty sure she belongs to the Paradise Valley crowd. Who would she be?"

Luke said, "Hell's bells, Ross, there's only one girl, one young girl, a girl that's as pretty as a picture, over to Paradise. That's Carmencita Valdez."

"Daughter of the little rooster that was here just now?"

"Niece," said Luke. "But what about her?"

"I'm in love," said Ross. "Im double damned because I'm twice in love the same night! Once with Bob's sweetheart, Rose Devlin. Now with Carmencita Valdez!"

"Well, then—" Luke started out, while Bob Roberts looked in a queer sort of way at Haveril.

"Well, then!" cried Haveril, and was dead in earnest. "You tell me, Luke. You tell me how come? You own my valley, do you? Let's have the story. And before you shift your cud and start, let me tell you something: Secret Valley is Haveril Valley, and it's going to be that way!"

"I'd be relieved," said Luke, and shifted his cud. And then, having marked the look on young Haveril's face and having taken stock of the tone of his voice, he said, "All right, I'll tell you the tale of woe. You'll remember you went away one time. You was just a kid. I looked all over the ranch for you next day and coudn't find you. That was the day after your mamma died."

He stopped and took a deep breath. When Ross's mamma had died, all those years ago, Luke had wished he was dead, too. But no one on earth, except Luke Oliver, and least of all Ross's mamma, guessed that. Luke kept staring at Ross now, and the old cattleman's nostrils, beginning to redden

around the edges, flared like a horse's.

Ross didn't say anything.

"All right," said Luke. "You upped and ran away and I ain't seen hide nor hair of you from that day to this. Nor your dad didn't see you, either, or hear from you or know where'n hell you'd went to. Well, him and me kept things going—and they kept going downhill. He went broke, good and plenty. Me, I'd saved my wages all my life. I kicked in with my wad, hoping to save Secret Valley. Your dad died, and I sort of reckon he was glad to; he'd been pretty damn lonesome. And there was a will. And he passed Secret Valley along to me—instead of to you. And if there's anything else you want to know, you just ask and I'll tell you."

"Why, damn you, Luke!" said Ross Haveril, and shot his hand out to grasp Luke's and nearly wrung it free of his wrist. "Why, damn you, Luke Oliver!"

"All right, all right, all right," said Luke, sounding petulant. "Now what? If you want your lousy old ranch back, go get me a piece of paper and a pen and some ink and I'll give it to you. It ain't worth the powder to blow it to hell. And besides, it's mortgaged clean to the hilt to a guy named Tom Storm, and I heard tell you know him."

"I want Secret Valley back," said Haveril, and if he had been earnest before he was sternly so now. "How much is the mortgage, Luke?"

"I borrowed five thousand. I couldn't even pay interest. I borrowed another thousand; that made it six and— Oh, hell, Ross, I ain't no mathematician. I'd say, off hand, about seven thousand, maybe eight."

"All right, all right, all right!" cried Ross, and mocked Luke Oliver and laughed at him. "Whatever the mortgage is, I'll pay it. And I'll give you the same amount in cash to buy Secret Valley back. And you can add onto that any damn amount you please, and I'll pay it, too! Is it a deal?"

"You?" said Luke. "You? You're talking to me? You've got some money? Don't make me laugh! It's getting late for me. Let's have a drink and go to bed. In the morning when you're sober, if ever, we'll talk."

"Come here, Luke," grinned Ross Haveril, "and help me pull my shirt tail out!"

But all without help he yanked his own shirt up. There

was a broad money belt about his middle—and both Bob Roberts and Luke Oliver saw that that middle of his was lean and clean like a good fighting man's. Then they forgot the young giant's anatomy and goggled at his money belt. The idea of Ross Haveril having two coins to rub together!

He unbuckled the thing and threw it at Luke Oliver.

"Take a look-see, you mountain-bred scion of a long string of alligator ancestors," said Ross Haveril.

Luke took the thing over to the old rickety table under the least dim of the lamps, and opened its several pouches and poured the contents out. There was gold and there were bank notes.

Luke counted roughly, just making a guess. Then,

"Watch me drop dead!" he said.

"It'll be a good job," said Ross. "And now, you tell me. That girl—what did you say her name was? Carmencita? And the other girl—Bob's girl—the Mountain House beauty that kills a man dead at forty yards—"

"You damned jackass!" yelled Luke. "You got close to a hundred thousand dollars here! Do you know it? And have you got sense enough—"

"The hell of it is," said Ross, "that I never gave a single little damn for any girl in my life before. And now tonight, there are two of them! And I can't tell which one—"

"What bank did you rob, Ross?" said Luke, and meant it. "You've got to take this money back. We'll get you out of it somehow—then, damn you, you go back to South America. South Africa is further; you better go there."

Ross didn't even take time to tuck his shirt tail in before he pounced on Luke Oliver. He grabbed Luke up in his arms, nearly squeezed the life out of him and did a lively waltz up and down the room with him, with Luke kicking like a bay steer.

"Luke! Luke, you old son of a Senegambian! We're going places, don't you know it? You and me, and maybe Bob, too, unless I steal his girl and make him mad and he tries to burn us down! You old fool, the pinch of money that's in that belt is just a whisper down the wind! There's more where that came from, and it's all ours."

"You've gone crazy," said Luke, red in the face and hot

around the collar when set down. "What I mean is, you always was crazy."

Bob Roberts hadn't said a word. He was a serious-minded sort of young fellow. He was white around the gills when he squared up to his old friend, Ross Haveril, and said what he had to say.

"Ross," he said, "I was mighty glad to see you tonight, to have you come back to us. But I don't know what the years have done to you since I saw you last. I don't much like your talk tonight. It happens that you've mentioned the name of a young lady two or three times, and I didn't like the way you did it. Maybe you're drunk and maybe you're sober; how the hell can I tell? Suppose we let everything ride over for another day. Come up to my place tomorrow—or I'll come down here."

"Suppose you keep your shirt on, Kid—"

But Bob Roberts had said his say and was through. He went out and to his horse and rode away.

Ross Haveril yelled after him, making a foghorn out of his voice, "Don't say a word about me having a money belt, Kid. I'm out for some fun."

CHAPTER IX

AND TO Luke Oliver, who sat as still as a paralyzed man, Ross Haveril said,

"Luke! Luke, old timer! It's great to see your ugly mug again!"

Luke regarded him sourly.

"Me, I can't say the same," he growled. "Here you come staggering back after a lot of years and after poking into all the dirty ports of the world, and you come back lousy with money, and, me, I know damn well you never worked for a cent of it. Me, I know you stole it. And somehow, I feel it in my bones, I'll have to dig you up out of a new scrape. Only I got a notion to call the sheriff in and see you hung up by the neck until you're dead, dead, dead!"

Ross Haveril's laughter almost took the roof off.

"I love you, Luke Oliver! How in merry hell did I live so many years without you? Put on your hat!"

"Yes?" said Luke, mean and sarcastic. "To go traipsing somewhere with the likes of you? Any time!"

"Luke! The years have made a sinking wreck out of you —you've grown to be an old man, a doddering old fool— you're as flat and stale and profitless as a bottle of beer opened up last week. Know what you need? A good dose of Haveril! That's me." He swept Luke's battered old hat off the table and clapped it down on Luke's semi-bald cranium. "Come ahead, Kid. We're going places. Just the two of us."

"I got a notion where," sighed Luke.

"Make your bet, Kid."

"Over to look at Rose Devlin. Then on to look at Carmencita Valdez! Hell, you make me sick!"

"Wherever we're going, anyhow let's go," said young Haveril, and lifted Luke up by the arm and started to the door.

Luke twisted his head about on its skinny neck and looked at what lay on the table.

"Sure," he said. "Let's go. And we'll just leave the money belt where it lays. Shucks, it's only about enough money to buy a half share of the U.S.A. with part of Mexico throwed in, so what do we care?"

So Ross Haveril turned back and stuffed his money again into the pockets of the broad leather belt, and strapped it about his middle and tucked his shirt tail in, and then the two men went out arm in arm. They even left the lamps burning, neither man of a mind for trifles.

They went to the barn and got their horses and started riding. Luke didn't know where they were going; they headed across Secret Valley toward the west; thus they had ahead of them the Mountain House, and also Lost Valley where Tom Storm held forth, and even Paradise Valley.

Ross had something under ten thousand questions to ask. It was so long since he had been here, and so much must have happened. He wanted to know all about the mines, up where Bob Roberts was; about Black Jack Devlin; about Lost Valley with Storm owning it; about Paradise Valley.

Luke answered, always terse and to the point, and when there was an opportunity, he asked, "That money you've got, Ross. Tell me! Turned highwayman?"

"Does it matter?" demanded Ross, and sounded truculent.

"It damn well matters," said Luke. "See here. You and me are like strangers, I haven't seen you for so long, and I don't know any more what you're like. If it's stolen money, if it's robbery money—and I'm close to being certain that's what it is, well then—"

"It's a long time, Luke, since I've ridden these trails. It's kind of good again. Remember that little mustard-colored, rat-tailed mare—we used to call her Yellow Blossom? The last time I rode her, coming down by the barn, the little devil all of a sudden swung sidewise and jumped the ditch, and I hadn't taken the trouble to draw the cinch tight, and the saddle turned, going down under her belly, and I spilled on my head—"

"Maybe that explains it," grunted Luke Oliver. "Maybe your landing on your head explains a lot of damnfool things you've gone and did."

"Tell me all about these two girls," said Ross. "Rose Devlin and Carmencita Valdez."

"They're nice girls," Luke told him stiffly. "Neither of them is for the likes of you. Both Tom Storm and Bob Roberts are in love with Black Jack's girl, and I hear tell that Storm is going to marry Carmencita, just because he wants the Valdez money and Paradise Valley. So I guess Bob will marry Rose Devlin, and Bob's a friend of yours, ain't he? So, as far as you go, it's hands off. If you want you a woman, better go back to South America."

"That sounds like Tom Storm," said Haveril. "He'll love one girl and marry the other for the sake of money! The hell he will! Maybe I'll pass Bob's girl up and go courting the Señorita, just to cut Storm out! It's an idea, huh, Luke?"

"You're a trouble-maker and always was. You'd do a thing like that if you could. But I guess both of them girls are safe from you. They can see higher than the under side of a worm, boy."

He sounded as though he meant it, but Ross only laughed.

"You haven't told me," Luke reminded him, "where we're going. And you haven't told me about that money."

"If you'll tend to your business, I'll tend to mine," said Ross.

At that Luke Oliver was of a mind to turn tail and go back. Hell with this Haveril tramp, anyhow. But he kept jogging along, his mind divided, his interest stepped up. He would like to know what young Ross had up his sleeve, and where he thought he was going.

They rode down to the little river and splashed across at the ford, their feet lifted from their stirrups, the water swirling up to their horses' bellies. There were glints of light in the dark water as though sparks had fallen from the bright, little stars.

Ross Haveril said out of a long silence,

"There was a fellow that Storm and I used to know. He and Storm got to be friends. His name was Hale; Willard Hale. He didn't come up this way with Storm, did he?"

"Nope," said Luke, little interested. "Not that I know of." But he bit the last words off short. Under his breath he said, "Hale? Willard Hale?"

"Well?" said Haveril.

"I'm thinking," said Luke. "There was a feller that was with Storm a few years ago. I only saw him once. I ain't sure I remember his name. Maybe it was Hale; sounds kind of like it."

"What about him?" asked Ross. "Not here any longer?"

"Nary. In Heaven or the other place, depends. Dead."

"Dead? Willard Hale? He was as strong as an ox, as healthy as a keg of ten penny nails. What happened?"

"Killed, if he's the man you mean. He was staying with Storm over in Lost Valley. Folks said they was pardners. Storm had a mean horse; he's got the brute yet and rides him sometimes. A big red stud horse that everybody in fifty miles knows; they call him Destruction Hale—if that was the feller's name—must of been drunk. They found him next morning in old Destruction's stall. The stallion had stomped him to death. It was a mess. You couldn't be sure what the man was—I saw him—turned me squeamish."

"I'd like to know," muttered Haveril. "I'd like to know if it was Hale. You see, Luke, it was like this: There were just the two of us at first. Tom Storm and me. Then down in Rio we picked up another American, a New Englander he

was but not what you'd think a New Englander would be; wild as a wildcat was Willard Hale. Later, he and Storm got as thick as thieves. When Storm did me out of what was mine, Hale played in with him. The two blew along together. I've always thought they were in cahoots all the time to skin me. So— Well, I'd like to know!"

"Better be careful, Kid," snapped Luke, "or you'll be telling me something!"

Ross only laughed at him and leaned far out of the saddle to clap a heavy hand on Luke Oliver's bony shoulder.

"I'll tell you everything, old timer. Everything I know. Only just give me time, will you?"

"Maybe," said Luke, and did his poor best to sneer, "you'll even break down and tell me whose bank you robbed or what train you held up to get that hundred thousand dollars you've got wrapped around your belly!"

"It's kind of funny," said Ross in a quiet voice, "about a horse massacring Willard Hale. Not many horses do that. Not many men end up that way. Yes, it's kind of funny. How many people saw it happen?"

"What are you driving at? I told you they found him in the stall next morning. Nobody saw it, nobody but old Destruction."

They jogged along, silent again. Ross Haveril, riding the old trails, finding memories in rocks and trees and crooks in the trail, was moodily thoughtful. But, having things on his mind, at last he spoke up.

"So Tom Storm, who had never been in this part of the world, came here as straight as a homing pigeon, because of the things I'd told him; because, me being lonesome and homesick, I told him all about Secret Valley and Lost Valley and Paradise—and he got hungry for it. It's the sweetest land in the world, Luke."

"Don't I know it?"

"Maybe. Maybe so. Anyhow, it goes like this. Tom Storm, his pockets heavy with gold he had lifted out of my jeans, comes up here and brings Will Hale along with him, and grabs off Lost Valley. And he and Hale had their times together, and they got drunk together, and they maybe fell in love together with the same girl—and Storm's stallion, Destruction, murdered Willard Hale—with nobody seeing

it done! Do you want to make me laugh, you old sidewinder?"

"Dammit, I've asked you once, what are you driving at?"

"Never mind," said Ross Haveril. "Let's go!"

"And you ain't said yet where we're going! I've got me a notion to block your trail right here; to yank you down off'n your high horse; to pull your britches down and spank hell out of you like I used to when you was three-four years old. In your head you ain't much older now."

That started Ross Haveril laughing again, and he leaned out to smite his old friend on the shoulder—but Luke Oliver dodged.

So they kept on riding. And all the while, Luke Oliver was trying to figure out,

"Where? Where's this wild Comanche dragging me?"

CHAPTER X

ROSS HAVERIL led the way straight up the ridge, taking the old, worn, steep trail, and so to Black Jack Devlin's place, the Mountain House. It still was early for a Saturday night; the house was bright with its kerosene lamps flashing their lights from twelve-inch silvered reflectors; the roulette ball was clicking its lively staccato invitation around its small bowl of fortune, there was the dry sound of poker chips and dice were rolling, while above these lesser sounds rose the rumbling, small thunder of men's voices, men who had been drinking and who were ready to break into *Sweet Adeline* at any moment, or to let themselves go with the rhythm of *Down Where the Wurtzburger Flows.*

Ross Haveril came as far as the door, and then only a step into the room, and stood there looking things over. Luke Oliver, at his elbow, was not looking at anybody but Ross Haveril, and Luke's eyes were narrowed into slits.

Rose Devlin was obvious, sitting on a high stool above the faro layout. Luke saw that Haveril's searching gaze found her out, and that Rose Devlin's eyes deserted the table fleetingly to traffic with Ross's, but he saw, too, that Ross kept turning his head, paying her no attention, looking for someone else.

For a little while all eyes focused on young Haveril. By now all here knew who he was, a vagabond Haveril returned after so many years, and all knew of his encounter with Tom Storm which many had witnessed. Behind the bar Hannigan regarded him narrowly and with little welcome in his eyes; and from another quarter of the room Black Jack Devlin stood looking at him. A glance passed between Black Jack and his faithful retainer Hannigan. Hannigan reached under the bar.

So for a short space the room was stilled; cards stopped riffling and poker chips ceased clicking and even the merry little ivory ball lay still and untouched where it had fallen on the wheel.

Ross Haveril's traveling eyes at last found Black Jack Devlin.

"Where's Storm?" he asked.

"Gone home," said Devlin.

Haveril turned and went out, and Luke Oliver kept at his heels. They swung up into their saddles and rode on. Luke didn't even ask where. It was clear enough now that they would go down into Lost Valley.

"Just what sort of bird is this little rooster Valdez anyhow?" Ross asked abruptly. "Is he a rattlesnake, scorpion, tarantula—or just plain horned-toad."

"What's Valdez done to you?" asked Luke.

"He's bought me out hide, hoof and horns. Gave me a hundred dollars to sell my soul to him. And me, I took the hundred! I've got it yet."

"Valdez loses," Luke grunted. "You ain't got no soul and never did have."

"What's between Valdez and Tom Storm?"

"Friendship, I reckon. Theyre together a lot. The Spanish gent is quite some gambler, or thinks he is; anyhow he's always gambling and losing. He goes to his *buen amigo* Storm for money; Storm always has money and lends it to him."

"And takes a mortgage on Paradise Valley?"

Luke shrugged. "How do I know. Maybe."

"And they're friends, are they? And Valdez gives me a hundred dollars to tell him what Storm ever did to me to make me call him the things I called him tonight! And

Valdez himself names Storm a yellow dog!—And Storm is in love with the Devlin girl—and wants to marry the Valdez kid? Luke, old boy, I've a notion that life at times can still grow interesting!"

"Damn you, Ross! I don't know that I'll go any further along with you! You haven't said to me a single word about where you got all that money. Me, I'm no sissy about things, but if you've gone in for highway robbery, like I'm pretty sure you have, well, you paddle your own canoe and let me swim ashore."

The words—or rather a thought bred from the words—stopped Ross like a shot. He reined his horse back to a standstill and reached out to stop Luke.

"Luke! I've got me a notion! Yes, I was on my way for a visit with Storm, but that can wait a few minutes. What I wanted, before I beat the pup half to death, was to clear off that mortgage on Secret Valley. But then Storm, too, will be asking where all the money came from. I don't want that. Let him think I'm broke. Let Valdez think that, too, and everybody else. You and me pop back to Black Jack's and take a whirl at faro or the wheel! We'll clean up a few thousands and then go along to Storm with our fairly won money. Come ahead!"

"You was about twelve-fifteen years old when you run away," snorted Luke. "Now you act up like you was six. What makes you think we'd win?"

For the second time that night Ross Haveril dug down to his money belt. Luke struck matches for him while he counted; then he shoved a handful of money, gold and crumpled bills together, into Luke's leathery old hand.

"There's around five thousand, Luke," he said, and strapped his belt on again. "You take it. Let folks think it's your mazuma. Me, I'll borrow some from you. We'll bust the bank."

"I'm damned if I will!" Luke told him, and sounded as vicious as a bullet.

Five minutes later Luke Oliver and Ross Haveril, side by side, re-entered the Mountain House. Ross went straight to Black Jack Devlin.

"I'm not here to make trouble, Devlin," he said. "If Storm was here it might be different, but he's gone. Here's

an old friend of mine. Luke Oliver. He was on his way over to Storm's valley to pay off a mortgage. I've got him to come in here and take a whirl at doubling his money. He's going to stake me and we're both going to play—and to be peaceable."

"That's fine," said Black Jack. "Name your game, Haveril."

And then he looked over at Luke, and Ross knew he was wondering where Luke had got any money.

Ross took full stock of the room's possibilities. He liked poker, but he didn't see a game running that promised quick action and sizeable stakes. There was faro, and the Devlin girl was perched on her lookout stool above it, and faro was good clean fun. Then there were dice games, and dice roll fast. And there was roulette. He thought, "I'll play roulette if I can get that gambling kid of Devlin's to deal!"

He hadn't so much as looked at her so far as she could tell. An hour or so ago he had cried out, "Girl!" and had seemed ready to ravish her away from under her father's roof and gallop off into the wilderness with her. This time he had ignored her.

But before naming his game as Black Jack had invited, he strolled over to the faro layout and stood for a minute or two, watching the play. Then he appeared for the first time to notice her.

He pulled off his hat.

"Evening, Miss," he said courteously.

Rose-alba inclined her head the fraction of an inch.

"Good evening," she said. "Is it faro then?"

He shook his head.

"Do you ever deal roulette?" he asked.

"Does a fish ever swim, Mister?" she countered.

"Luke!" called Haveril. "Come over here. How much money you got?"

He and Luke staged their act, Haveril doing most of it, Luke taking his cues.

"How much you want, Kid?" he asked.

"I'd like a million," Haveril grinned. "But I'll take a few hundred. Got a thousand? Maybe two-three thousand? Gimme!"

He thrust out his hand. Again the room was hushed. Who

ever heard a question like that put to Luke Oliver? When did Luke, the unlucky, ever have more than enough for the next pair of boots?

Luke put a hand into his pocket and brought out a mess of money, gold and wadded banknotes that looked untidy and thunderingly rich. He counted out three thousand dollars to Ross Haveril.

"Come again, Luke," said Ross. "Three never was my lucky number. Another thousand, old timer."

Luke gave him another thousand. This thousand Ross promptly handed to Black Jack Devlin's girl.

"That's yours, Kid," he said, "if you'll deal a few spins at the wheel for me."

For some obscure reason which Rose Devlin did not take time to fathom, she turned red. She started to throw the money back into his face. But she checked that impulse and slid down off her stool without saying a word. She led the way to the roulette table, and the dealer there, having heard every word as had everyone else in the room, surrendered his place to her. Then she tossed Ross Haveril's money down.

"I don't like you or anything about you, Mr. Man," she said, "nor do I want any of your charity—especially seeing it's Luke Oliver's and not yours. If you want to get rid of it, plank down your bet, and the house will take it fast enough."

Ross stood there looking at her and at first there was nothing but a very lively admiration in his look: then his broad grin came.

"I'm giving you that thousand dollars, Rose Devlin," he said.

"You're doing nothing of the sort, Ross Haveril! I won't take it!"

"But you will! You're going to!"

"*I won't!* And now do you want to play or—"

"I'm ready whenever you are. Know what that means, little Miss?"

She spun the wheel, and the ivory pellet went spinning dizzily. Then Ross said,

"I'm betting a thousand dollars on the red. That's because I know that black is coming up! See? And you'll rake in the

thousand, and that's my present to you—and if you want to run and give it to the house, that's all right, too. And on the side I'm betting you—*you,* Rose Devlin—I'm betting you the drinks for the house that black does come up and that I lose my thousand!"

He put his thousand dollar bet down on the red and stood looking at her, his eyes teasing and mocking her.

"I'll take you," retorted the girl, her voice like thin ice breaking on a winter pond. And she took him because it was next door to impossible for Jack Devlin's daughter to refuse any bet.

Men began gathering about the table. Ross did not watch the ball as most men do, but kept his eyes on her face. It was a face which was studiously turned from his.

The ball leaped down into the bowl and began clicking, seeming to have great difficulty in making up its mind, whether for red or black, whether for odd or even, whether for this, that or the other column; perhaps it was about to come to rest on the green, zero or double zero. But Ross didn't look at it. Even when it stopped, he kept looking at the girl's face. He wanted to see whether he could make out that way what the result was.

No, he couldn't tell a thing. Black Jack had taught her. So at last he looked down. And then of a sudden he burst out into one of his big booming laughs.

"Oho!" he shouted at her. "It's like I told you! It's black and so you take the thousand as a present from your new friend! It's black, and so you buy the drinks for the house! I win both ways!" and he kept on laughing.

There were men there who looked from him to one another, and their looks said, "The man's crazy!" Because there was no doubting his sincerity, his high delight. He had lost the thousand dollars that he had promised her, and he had stuck her for the drinks all around!

Rose Devlin raked in the money. She turned to the bar.

"Hannigan," she said quite coolly, but the color was higher than ever in her cheeks and there was the faintest twitch at the corner of her mouth, "the drinks are on me." Then from under high-lifted brows, her head thrown back, looking down her nose the best she could at Haveril, she said, "Champagne, Mr. Haveril?"

"Bless your soul, I could love you!" roared Haveril, more delighted than ever. "Champagne, yes. If you drink with me!"

"Thank you, but—"

"Oh, be yourself, Kid. Be a sport, for that's what you are anyhow."

She smiled at him, and made her smile as cruel as a knife blade.

"Thank you. I'd love a glass with you."

"And now," he warned her as their glasses frothed over, "friendship ceases. Watch me. If your wheel's not much crookeder than a dog's hind leg I'm going to break the bank."

"Luck, Mr. Haveril," she said, and even clinked glasses with him.

"My name's Ross," he told her. "I was born up here. This is my home. I'm one of you folks. And the name is Ross."

"Luck, Ross!"

"How, Rose!"

They drank and, with all others drinking and with a dense crowd gathered about the table, Ross Haveril started in to play.

He played wildly, he played recklessly; he had only one system, and perhaps that is the only system which can ever win, which was to play without any system at all. If a number beckoned to his imagination, he played it. He played all over the board. But he no longer trifled with red and black, and had no mind for other nearly even breaks. He did ask,

"What's the ceiling, Rose?"

Black Jack Devlin was now standing at his daughter's elbow.

"Take the roof off for him tonight, Rosie," said Black Jack.

She shook her head stubbornly.

"No! This man has gone pardners with the devil. And who's running this wheel anyhow?"

"What do you want, Haveril?" asked Devlin.

"A run for my money," said Ross, "but to have it snappy. I've got places to go."

"Make your bets," said Devlin. "I'll cover if I have to give you the house. Let her roll, Rose."

For the initial attack Ross scattered five hundred dollars across the table altogether haphazardly, playing numbers at about a hundred dollars on each that felt lucky. He lost, and Rose Devlin raked her winnings in. She appeared quite indifferent; for his part he was frankly interested, like a boy.

Again he put down five hundred dollars, placing a hundred on each of five numbers. Again the wheel spun and the ivory ball raced while he stood watching not the game but the girl. Then for the first time he became aware of Bob Roberts' presence. The young mining man had just stepped up to a position behind Rose. He was looking over her shoulder at his old friend, and Bob's were grave, troubled eyes.

None of Haveril's numbers came up. The money was raked in. Two thousand of the four gone in three quick plays.

"We don't want to drag this thing out all night," he said. He handed over his remaining two thousand and said, "Let me have four chips, will you?"

She shoved them out to him.

"Each chip is five hundred, Mr. Haveril."

"You're good at arithmetic," he grinned at her. "Let's see how fast you can figure out how much thirty-five times five hundred is."

"Seventeen thousand, five," said Rose.

He reached across the table to place his four chips. One on the double zero, one on the seventeen, one on eleven, one on the last number, thirty-six. And again, while every other person in the room now watched the wheel, some of them holding their breaths, he kept his eyes steadily on her face. He thought, "I'll bet a man I can read the answer in her face this time!"

The ball seemed more hesitant than ever in coming to rest, clicking and bouncing and skittering along again. But at last it stopped on its number, and the tale was told, and the room was hushed—and still Ross kept his eyes on the girl. Slowly she lifted her head; she looked straight back into his eyes, hers as steady as his—and for the life of him

he could not detect the faintest hint in her expression whether she had won or lost.

He didn't say anything but looked swiftly at the table. Then, exactly as he had done on the first bet when he lost his first thousand, he burst out into a storm of laughter. It was laughter that rolled out like jovial thunder; there was no malice in it and no mockery, but only unaffected delight. It was as simple and sincere, and gleeful as a child's laughter.

The chip he had placed on number thirty-six had won. His long shot had come galloping home. He had won seventeen thousand five hundred dollars where his other three chips had lost; his net gain on the play was sixteen thousand dollars.

"Do you wish chips or the cash, Mr. Haveril?" said Rose Devlin, and still she did not turn a hair.

"Why, chips of course!" Then he appeared suddenly to reflect; he turned to Luke Oliver standing close behind him and said, "How about it, Luke? Since it's your money and I'm just having the fun of playing for you, maybe you'd better speak up before it's too late!"

Luke glared at him: he came dangerously close to exploding, "It's not my money and you know it, and I'm double damned if I want to get drug into any of your crazy doings."

Ross said, "Fine!" as though accepting Luke's silence and baleful glare as full permission to sail ahead. And so he said the second time, "Sure, chips of course. Seventeen blues for seventeen thousand, and another red for my five hundred. We'll have some fun yet!"

The girl's deft fingers stacked the required chips swiftly and shoved them forward. Ross gathered them in.

A look passed between the girl and her father. It was only a brief glance and told no observer anything. She did not so much as lift her brows, Black Jack neither shook his head nor nodded nor shrugged his shoulders.

The wheel spun, the ball raced—and Ross Haveril found himself watching Bob Roberts standing so close to Devlin's daughter. He thought that Bob's jaw had hardened, that a something of hardness, too, had come into his eyes.

"He loves that girl with everything that's in him," thought Haveril.

Then he returned his attention to the table and swiftly placed his bet.

Since he played no system he had no plan; it was his way to make his bets haphazardly as the impulse came. Now he was about to distribute a scattering of chips on numbers altogether at random, but of a sudden he changed his mind. With the ball still whirring he shoved his stack, and now it represented eighteen thousand dollars, on the red.

As before all eyes but his were on the play, but this time it was not at the girl's face that he looked but at Bob Roberts'. Bob's jaws were set harder than ever, and Ross understood. In Bob's eyes it was not Black Jack Devlin whom he was playing, but Black Jack's daughter. And maybe Bob knew that if Ross Haveril's crazy luck stood good for another play or two she was apt to be on a spot where she would know the pinch of poverty.

The ball clicked, fell and stopped—and Ross saw a sudden contraction of Bob's muscles about mouth and eyes.

Red had come up. Haveril's eighteen thousand was now thirty-six.

He laughed again as before, not with mockery or spite or gloating or even triumph; just laughed at something funny. He laughed as though expecting others to join in—as though the thing were so pleasantly amusing that surely Black Jack and Rose, too, would accompany him with a shout of mirth.

No one laughed. Not even Luke who just stood and goggled.

Black Jack was used to taking losses just as he was used to winning, and gave no sign. His daughter looked as cool and unmoved as he. But her voice was a very toneless, quiet voice when she asked:

"Cash or chips, Mr. Haveril?"

"Chips!" he told her promptly. "Let's have chips!"

Then Black Jack Devlin said as tonelessly as Rose had spoken,

"I have no desire to welch, but in fairness to you I must tell you that, not having been prepared for any considerable play tonight, the cash on hand is limited. Suppose you should make another play like that and win, the house

would owe you a total of fifty-four thousand dollars. And that's about all I've got on hand."

Haveril regarded him steadily, trying to size him up. For Devlin had said, "Take the roof off for him," and he had said, "I'll cover you if I have to give you the house."

Perhaps Black Jack caught his thought; certainly he remembered his own words of a few minutes ago. So he added,

"In case you should win all my ready cash and continued to go on playing, I'd do as I promised and stake my house here."

"What value do you put on it?" asked Haveril.

"A hundred thousand, and let it go lock, stock and barrel."

Ross turned to Luke Oliver.

"How about it, Luke? Seeing it's your money, you better speak up. Want Devlin's place here? Worth a hundred thousand to you?"

"What the hell would I do with a house like this?" Luke snapped back at him, and for the first time men laughed, for they all knew that Luke through preference had lived in a bare old bunkhouse all his life.

"Let's go," said Ross then, and turned back to Rose Devlin. "If I can break the bank for Luke he's of a mind to let you keep a roof over your head."

She didn't speak, didn't even nod, nor did she hesitate. Again the little ivory ball went spinning along its merry way.

The crowd was tight-jammed about the table now; men were standing on tiptoes and craning their necks to watch. Haveril was in no hurry to play. He, too, stood there watching the ball; he was biding his time, waiting for a "hunch." But at last, while there was still time he decided.

"Eighteen thousand on red to repeat," he said.

They didn't have to wait long now; the ball was almost spent. It dropped into the bowl, skipped and clicked and stopped.

Red had repeated.

Ross didn't laugh this time. A man can't keep on laughing spontaneously at the same joke; it grows stale with repetition even when it's one of fate's merriest quips.

Black Jack Devlin counted out fifty-four thousand dollars, some in gold, the greater part in yellow backs.

Rose Devlin drew the cloth cover over the table.

Black Jack said to the hushed room, "That's all tonight, boys. The bank is flat."

Ross Haveril gathered up his gleanings without counting, snatched off Luke Oliver's battered old hat, dropped the money into it and said with a grin,

"Here you are, Luke. Go have yourself a time. But keep in mind I worked like a good and faithful servant for you tonight, so if some day I come to your back door for a handout, you'll maybe throw in a cup of coffee with the sandwich."

Then he plowed his way through the crowd and went out.

Luke Oliver stood like a man in a dream. He opened his mouth to say something to Black Jack Devlin, something to Black Jack's daughter—but he couldn't think of anything to say.

He hurried after Ross Haveril, muttering under his breath to himself, holding his old hat gingerly in both hands as though it contained eggs.

CHAPTER XI

AS THE DOOR closed behind Haveril and Luke the gaming room's silence was disrupted by an explosive outbreak of talk. Some men went back to the bar for a drink or two before the long ride home; others stood in knots discussing the thing they had watched happen. Many wanted to know all about Ross Haveril, just who and what he was and where he had come from.

Rose Devlin didn't even look at her father. She moved toward the door, meaning to slip out alone and into the darkness of the porch.

Bob Roberts followed her.

"Not now, Bob—"

"Listen. I want to talk to you—"

"About that friend of yours? Ross Haveril? Or is he a man at all—or just the devil popping up for a holiday?"

Skilled as she was in hiding her emotions, he knew what it meant to her to have lost so heavily. He said.

"I don't know that he is a friend of mine."

"Why? Because he won? Because you are sorry for me?"

"No. Not that. Because of something else that happened down in Secret Valley after we left here. Something said."

She opened the door to go out; she stood there a moment looking back over the room, seemingly of a sudden keenly interested in something—he couldn't make out what had caught her attention like that.

At the bar Hannigan was gloomily setting forth bottles and glasses.

"That bum, that tramp Haveril," he growled, "sure he has the devil's own luck."

Black Jack Devlin on leaving the room, passed through a door that led deeper into the sprawling house. As he did so his eye caught the eye of a man who already was watching him keenly; there was almost a hungry look in that man's eye. Black Jack made the slightest gesture, an almost imperceptible lifting of the chin accompanied by the slightest drooping of the eyelids. He had not stopped; he passed through the door and closed it behind him.

The man who had sent such a searching look after the gambler was one of a half dozen who had come up from the Broken Ridge country that lay slightly off trail about midway between the Mountain House and the mines in the north. Built along the general lines of a gorilla, black-bearded and gimlet-eyed and long-lipped, roughly garbed in worn cowboy boots and chaps and checked shirt and leather jacket, he bore as hard a reputation as any who ever came here, and looked the part.

That was Bull Strake.

Rolling along with that spraddling, awkward stride of his, he went to the bar. A glance over his shoulder drew more men to his side, two of the Bedloe boys, and Jake Godown of mixed—badly mixed—Indian and negro and Portuguese blood. They, along with Bull Strake, were from the Broken Ridge country.

The four gulped their liquor with a rush and went outside. Bob Roberts and the Devlin girl standing on the porch

saw them go to their horses, swarm up into their saddles and speed away.

Ross and Luke, the night's winnings again in Ross's possession, were already riding slowly toward Lost Valley and Tom Storm. That Ross carried the money was because Luke would have not a thing to do with it. Growling at every step, fiercely clutching his old hat which, Luke muttered, wasn't meant ever to hold anything more precious than its owner's head—and that, said Luke, wasn't worth six bits as he and everyone else knew—he followed young Haveril to their horses. There he blew up.

"Take it, damn you," he said. "I wouldn't touch it again with a ten-foot pole, and I'll tell you why. It ain't mine, to begin with; and besides that it was won with stolen money; and besides—"

"Pshaw, Luke!" said Ross.

"Take it, dammit, or I'll dump it on the ground!"

So Ross scooped it out of the hat, using both hands and stuffing it into his pockets.

"Come ahead then, old sorehead," said Ross, and Luke knew he was grinning as he went up into the saddle.

"No. Me, I'm going home."

But though he grumbled, he allowed himself to be persuaded. After all he hadn't seen Ross in many years and he did like the fool kid, and what was more he hankered in his leathery old heart to be in on the scene when Haveril and Tom Storm met again.

But he was not through finding fault. He condemned everything Ross had ever done in all his born days, and he wound up jeering with frank relish:

"And haven't you got sense enough to know it's the biggest fool thing you could do to go riding through this country with a barrel full of money on you like you've got now? There are a lot of men here that know you're toting anyhow more than fifty thousand dollars. It's like begging a pack of timber wolves to go visit a fat sheep."

"Shucks, Luke. Those boys are not a gang of cutthroats. Most of them—"

"It's a lot you know about them," grunted Luke. "I looked the crowd over and I know every man-jack of them. There's anyhow a baker's dozen in that house right this

minute that would pop a string of bullets into you for five hundred dollars, let alone a thousand. And fifty thousand—whew!"

He yanked off the hat which he had so freshly clapped on, and massaged his brow with a horny set of fingers.

"One thing," he added, "most likely they'll think we're headed back to Secret Valley. I guess it might be lucky after all that we're riding the other way."

"I notice you still wear a forty-five," returned Haveril, and Luke could tell that he was still grinning. "I'll bet it's the same old cannon you had when I was a kid; I'll bet I've shot it many a time. Got a rabbit on the jump with it once, remember? And me, I've got into the habit of wearing a shoulder holster. If the boys should get it into their heads to start some fun I'll bet we'd get as many of them as they got of us!"

"Not me," declared Luke. "I'd duck into the brush and let you fight it out by yourself."

All the answer he got to that was to have Ross reach out and clap him on the shoulder and laugh at him.

Then Ross began to speak of plans.

"Tom Storm's and my personal affairs can wait a while," he said thoughtfully. "He won't run away and neither will I. First of all we're going to clear off that mortgage he holds on Secret Valley. Then, Luke, old boy, if you are willing to sell it back to Haveril, you will name your price and I'll pay it."

"I don't know that I will," grumbled Luke, of no mood to agree to anything.

Some two or three miles from the Mountain House they struck into the steeply zig-zagging trail which led down from the ridge to a long open stretch of benchland set like a broad step on the mountainside. But before they dropped down to this strip of level land, and despite the noise of their horses' hoofs clanging on rocky going and starting stones rolling, they heard the clatter of following hoofs Luke jerked his head around, listened intently a moment, then observed angrily, yet with a dash of grim relish in his tone.

"What did I tell you? There they come, four or five men after us, and riding hell-for-leather all they can."

"Some of the boys going home," said Ross carelessly. "With the games shut down they'll be going somewhere else."

"They're in a right smart hurry, Kid. Suppose you and me step along, too."

So the two made the best speed they could on the steep descent, and came soon to the level. Doing so they rode out of the dark of the rocky trail snaking among stunted timber and boulders as big as a house, and came out into the starlight. They heard the following hoofbeats still louder; the unseen riders, riding hard, were overtaking them.

"The fools will break a horse's leg that way!" said Ross angrily. "They must be drunk."

"Drunk, your foot. They've smelled easy money. Enough a make a gang like them rich for life. Wearing spurs, ain't you? Know how to use 'em?"

"If you happen to be right— Well, it's not much fun running away Luke."

"It's more fun than being robbed, Kid, and twice as much fun as being dead."

So they touched their horses up and rode along the stretch of level land. But they had not gone far when the men behind them, riding so recklessly, came down from the higher trail to the rim of the benchland, and a voice shouted to them,

"Hey, there! Hold on a minute."

Ross didn't stop, but he slowed down and turned in the saddle, calling back,

"What do you want? Who are you anyhow?"

"Wait a shake," came the answer after the briefest hesitation.

"Looks like you're right, Luke," admitted Ross.

"Let's go then."

"Get into it. I'm with you."

Luke shot ahead like a dark blur in the night; Ross followed, though reluctantly. He kept looking back and thought he made out, though very vaguely since the darkness was thickest where the mountain trail came down to the flat, several swiftly moving forms. An instant later he

was sure, for the crackle of gunfire broke out and he saw hot angry spits of flame.

He swung his horse in an arc as he dragged his gun out of its holster where it hung close under the left armpit, and fired twice in answer to the gunfire he had seen.

Luke, cursing him roundly, slowed down.

"You crazy fool, let 'em be. Stop to fight, and they're bound to get you."

"They can't hit anything, riding like that, and us riding, and the light what it is."

"If they can't, then you can't, so what's the use."

"I might be lucky," said Ross. "Seems as though it was my lucky night. You scoot along, Luke; I'll overtake you."

The men pursuing them slowed down when Ross started shooting; he could catch the slower beat of their horses' hoofs. Perhaps they thought that he had stopped to fight it out and so came on more deliberately.

All the while, Luke Oliver kept drenching Ross with swearwords and a wrathful insistence that they ride on their spurs and get clear of this mess, but he, too, had started shooting. It was like this:

"Damn you, Ross Haveril!"—Bang!—"If you had the sense God gave geese—" —Bang!—"We'd be getting the hell out of here!"—Bang! Bang!

At last he and Ross could see their pursuers clearly enough to count them; four men, and the starlight showed one of their mounts to be a palomino. He was about to call out to Ross that he knew who one of the riders was and could guess the rest, when a new factor came into play. From some little distance behind the four men and above them on the trail that led down from the Mountain House, still another man called out, and his voice rang clear and distinct in the stillness that came briefly between shots. The voice shouted.

"You, Strake! You, Bull Strake! Watch your step!"

Ross, listening with all his ears, exclaimed,

"Why, that's Bob's voice! He's followed after them!"

A roar burst from bull-throated Bull Strake, and his gun flashed and he began slinging lead up-trail where no doubt he could make out young Bob Roberts riding down upon him. For, whereas abruptly Strake's party and both Luke

and Ross had stopped, Bob Roberts kept coming on.

And still Roberts kept coming on. His gun, too, was out and he was firing down at Strake.

"Good old Bob!" shouted Ross, and let out a yell like a Comanche's, and the next thing Luke knew, Ross was charging back across the benchland, calling zestfully to his old friend, "Good boy, Bob! We've got the rats between us! Give 'em hell, Bob!"

Then Luke Oliver, almost weeping in his rage, jabbed his spurs home, but not to head toward safety; he came thundering along close behind Ross whom he cursed at every jump, yet whom in his secret heart he had ever loved as a son.

And then, when least expected, still another factor entered the game. Just as Bob Roberts had taken a hand, all without advance notice, so now did another man, one who had lurked in the dark at the base of the steep declivity down which Bob Roberts was riding. That man kept his mouth shut, but both Ross and Luke saw the flash of his gun. He fired several times in quick succession, and they couldn't tell what he was shooting at. But they did hear the sudden rapid beat of his horse's hoofs as, after firing, he raced away, deeper into the shadows, headed up toward the other end of the flat. And they did realize that all of a sudden Bob Roberts had ceased firing—and his voice did not call out in answer to Ross Haveril—and Ross, understanding, emptied his gun after the unseen fleeing rider.

Luke Oliver's curses flew out to a fresh mark.

"Damn him!" he stormed. "Some jasper, hid in the dark, has dry-gulched young Roberts! Damn 'em all, Kid. Let's go get 'em!"

But Ross was already going like the mill tails of hell. So of a sudden rôles were reversed, and it was two men, grim with fury, who bore down upon four who just now had attacked them. And somehow, riding hard as they did, both Ross Haveril and Luke Oliver, men who had been in tight spots before and who kept their wits clear and their hands steady, filled the empty chambers of their guns.

They rode straight into a crackle of gun fire and saw the angry powder flashes, and kept on riding. For a little while now they held their fire and heard bullets whining about

them without answering, knowing that there would be no second chance to reload. Then,

"Burn 'em down, Kid!" yelled Luke and yanked his horse back on its haunches and slid to the ground and opened up.

Young Haveril's boots struck the ground almost the second Luke's did; their shots were sped simultaneously. And, as parts were reversed, the whole complexion of the affair was altered. Bull Strake and the Bedloe boys—Bud and Carter—and Jake Go-down, had counted on a surprise attack, on their two-to-one odds; they had been overbold and confident, and now were ruffled. They had not reloaded their empty guns. Bull Strake emitted a roar in that bull's voice of his, wheeled his horse and led a retreat. The others were off at his heels, dodging lead as they rode, bent low over their horses' manes. And they, like the unknown man who had ridden in the dark and shot Bob Roberts, raced northward toward the upper end of the flat.

"Leave 'em go, Kid," said Luke, when again their guns were hot and empty. "We didn't get 'em this time, but we know who they are. And we better go see about Bob. There ain't been a cheep out of him. I fear me, Ross."

So they rode back to the steep trail and then up it for the short distance to where at last they saw the blured outline of a horse; the animal stood riderless, fidgeting, jerking its head up, shaking it, jerking it up again, backing up and stopping, and jerking and backing again.

The nervous horse was as good as a pointer to show them where Bob Roberts lay beside the trail. Luke came to him first and was down on his knees, bending over him, when Ross joined him. The two men looked at each other in the faint starlight; at first they thought that Bob was already dead.

But a man, no matter how badly hurt, doesn't as a rule die as quick as that. Their groping hands found that there was life in him yet. When they spoke and he did not answer they struck matches to look at him better, to seek his wound. His eyes were wide open and reflected the match flares.

"Bob," said Ross Haveril gently, more gently than Luke had ever heard him speak before. "Bob, old man."

"He's shot in the chest, high up," said Luke, and his questing old hand was wet and sticky. "Try to find a pine knot, Ross, or something to make a light. "We got to stop the blood."

Bob saw them and tried to say something, but couldn't. The muscles in his neck relaxed, his head rolled sideways and his eyelids came down like heavy curtains.

"Dead!" whispered Ross.

"No," said Luke after a moment, "But damn near dead, Ross. But maybe if we can stop this damn hemorrhage before he bleeds to death—"

They found a pitchy piece of dead pine and set it blazing, and by its smoke-veiled light did their best with strips of cloth from their own shirts to seal the ugly wound. Then they sat back on their heels and again stared at each other's granite faces.

"We've got to get him somewhere—"

"Moving him is like to kill him. Leaving him here is sure to."

"Back to the Mountain House. There's nowhere else," said Luke.

But Ross deliberated in coming to a decision, was of another mind. He said.

"It's about the same distance down to Lost Valley, Luke. And from here on the going is easy. To carry him back uptrail to the Mountain House would shake him to pieces. What's more, I guess our best bet for a doctor is in Liberty, isn't it? We'd be nearer at Lost Valley, and we wouldn't be losing time going up to Black Jack's and back again."

"I don't like it," muttered Luke. "He and Tom Storm hate each other like poison. They never were friendly even before Rose Devlin came into the picture. And remember Bob tied into Storm tonight to finish your fight for you."

"Just the same," maintained Ross stubbornly, "a worse man than Tom Storm, if there is such an animal, wouldn't pitch out a man in Bob's shape. Come on; let's go. It's Bob's only chance, if he's got any at all."

He went for his horse and said from his place behind the saddle,

"Hand him up to me, Luke. This horse'll stand for it."

When Luke got his arms about Bob's still form and

heaved to raise it, a stab of pain wrenched Bob back to semi-consciousness. They could hear his low and indistinct voice trying to say something. For a moment Luke stood stone still, his head cocked sideways, his ear attentive. Then both he and Ross heard the few mumbled words.

"Rosalie—see, dear—I told you—my lucky night! Rosalie, we are going to— Do you remember—"

His murmurings ceased. Luke stared up at Ross.

"We better go back to Black Jack's, Kid. He'd like that best—"

Ross again deliberated, again shook his head.

"No. The other way is best, easier, the common sense thing. I'll take him. I'll have to ride slow. You pound the trail back to the Mountain House and tell the Devlins. You can bring the girl with you. You ought to be at Storm's by the time I get there."

Between them they got Bob into the saddle. Ross put an arm about him, supporting him, used his free hand on the reins and started slowly down trail. Luke watched him out of sight, then went to his own horse and hurried back to the Mountain House.

CHAPTER XII

THOUGH Ross Haveril did not dare hasten, neither did he loiter, and he came first with his burden down onto the floor of Lost Valley and across Lost River and through broad, oak-studded fields along a faint wagon track which brought him to the ranch house. He saw the lights from far off, twinkling through the oaks.

There was a high white picket fence surrounding the grounds which the house centered and which had been erected at the time when Tom Storm had taken over the property, virtually rebuilding the rambling old home, making it over into the sort of place to strike the eye from afar. For from the beginning Storm had meant to cut a wide swath up here; it was his way to be the big toad in any puddle, large or small, wherein he tarried. Coming here, he was satisfied; he intended to settle and stay; he started in at the outset to make clear, from one end of the state to the

other, that Tom Storm had arrived and was to be reckoned with.

Ross Haveril, arrived at the fence, shouted for someone to open the gate. It was hard to manage, with the body of an unconscious man—or a dead man—in the crook of his arm. But no one came, though he shouted the second time. So he did manage after all, forcing his horse close alongside the fence, dropping the reins long enough to unfasten the gate and swing it open. He rode along a path through young trees which Storm had had set out to make himself a garden, and so came to the front porch. Still no door had opened.

He called again with the same lack of result, and began wondering; with the house lighted up and at this comparatively early hour, there should be someone about. Storm himself had returned home from the Mountain House some hours ago.

No doubt he would find men in some outhouse somewhere at the rear of the house, but he had seen no lights there and wanted to get Bob Roberts under a roof and in bed with no delay. So, steadying the horse with a firm rein and then a quiet, commanding voice, he slid down to the ground and eased Roberts from the saddle. He carried his burden to the door, found it unlocked, opened it and entered Tom Storm's big living room.

There were tables with lamps on them; there were big easy chairs in red and blue leather dotting a floor covered with a scattering of bearskins and Navajo rugs; in front of the wide-mouthed fireplace was a comfortable looking sofa. On that, with a cushion at its head, he placed the lax body of his old friend. He stood a moment looking down into the bloodless face; he leaned close to mark an almost imperceptible breathing; then he went hurrying through the house, calling softly.

The place remained hushed save for the sounds he himself made; his voice and his boot heels on uncarpeted floors sounded loud in his ears. He went to the foot of the staircase; all was dark above so he came back along the hallway and turned in at the kitchen. There was a bottle on the table, half full; beside it was a glass with a few drops of liquor in it.

Assured that there was no one in the house, he returned to the front room; a glance at Bob Roberts was all that was required. He had not stirred; he still looked like a dead man.

Bob's chances, Ross knew, were running out on him with every flickering beat of a failing pulse; if help were to be had it must come with no avoidable second of delay. Ross hurried outside and ran around the house, headed for the men's quarters which would be somewhere in the rear. Finally, he saw a faint gleam of light; a candle, he judged, was still burning in the bunkhouse.

Still running, rounding a corner of the barn, he crashed full tilt into a man hurrying almost as swiftly as Ross himself. The man was carrying a saddle and was about to turn in at the barn door.

"You blundering fool!" the man with the saddle said angrily. "What the hell—"

"Storm?" exclaimed Ross Haveril. "That you, Storm?"

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Storm. Then, "Haveril? Ross Haveril here at my place?"

"I've been looking everywhere for you. Rout one of your men out, tell him to get a horse saddled the quickest way and come to the house. You come with me. Hurry, man!"

"Look here, what's all this—"

But Ross had already whirled and was hurrying back to the ranch house. He realized that no matter how a messenger might hurry, it would be hours before he could locate a doctor and get him back here. Meantime, Bob's condition shrieked to high heaven for some sort of first aid. So he paid no attention to Storm shouting after him.

And Storm, hurriedly disposing of his saddle in the harness room at the barn, after him.

Ross Haveril was baring Bob's chest, meaning to have a good look at the wound by lamplight and to do what he could for it, when he heard Storm coming into the room from the kitchen. He straightened up and turned about; Storm came striding forward, his face flushed and hot, his eyes bright with the fury which Ross's presence here whipped up in him, a torrent of words seething up to his lips. Then for the first time he saw the man on the couch.

He stopped dead in his tracks. The blood that had red-

dened his face seeped out of it and before Ross Haveril's marveling eyes Tom Storm turned white. So, too, did the rage seem to drain out of him, replaced by a fresh emotion as a look akin to fright dawned in his eyes.

It was for the world as if Tom Storm saw a ghost.

And that set Ross Haveril marveling more than ever. For he knew Tom Storm for a hard man; and he knew with the fresh knowledge gleaned tonight that Storm had no love for Bob Roberts; that the two hated each other with such hate as can come to men like them when a girl like Rose Devlin is the cause of it; and he remembered that only a few hours earlier the two had fought at the Mountain House. Yet now Tom Storm saw the man he hated lying there like one in the grip of death—and Storm was mightily moved.

But all that he had seen in Storm's expression and all these, his own thoughts, occupied not more than two or three seconds of actual time and were gone. The experience was such as a man might have were a shade snapped up over a lighted window, and he looked into a room and the shade had been jerked down instantly.

Tom Storm came on again; he spoke curtly in his customary masterful voice, saying.

"Hello, it's Roberts! What happened?"

"Shot," said Haveril. "He's in bad shape, Storm; you can see that. Did you get a man started for a horse?"

"No. I wanted to know what it was all about. I'll send a man on the run for Doc Keplin. Likely that means all the way down to Liberty; no chance of getting him here until some time tomorrow morning."

Before he finished speaking he was on his way outside again. Ross Haveril turned back to Roberts.

He was working over the still unconscious, scarcely breathing man, with warm water and iodine and tape and bandages which he had found in Storm's bathroom cabinet, when the front door was flung open and Rose Devlin came running into the room. She came to an abrupt halt; her hands flew up to her breast as she, like Tom Storm before her, paled, and her eyes dilated.

Small wonder in her case, thought Haveril. On Bob's face was the look of death, his extreme pallor accentuated

and made grotesque and horrible by the smear of blood across forehead and cheekbone. And Bob, just now for the first time, moved ever so slightly; one could scarcely be sure that he stirred at all; it was like a dead man grown restless.

Rose Devlin spun about and fled the room, vanishing more precipitately than she had entered. Ross heard clearly in the intense silence the few words she was crying out hysterically, over and over:

"I can't! *I can't! Oh, God, I can't!*"

Though she had never looked on death before, she knew in one wild, electric second what Ross Haveril now at last was heavily conceding himself: Bob Roberts was dying. There was no longer any call to send a man speeding for a doctor. Ross thought of that, too, with the rim of his mind while all the core of his thought split upon the two major facts: Bob was dying—and the girl he loved was right outside there in the dark, denying him.

Bob's was one of those cases in which a man, before he pegs out, comes surging up briefly out of black unconsciousness. His eyes opened and roved; his lips began moving, with tremendous difficulty shaping words. Ross, stooping so close that his ear all but brushed the desperate lips, heard:

"Rosalie? You are here, Rosalie?"

"Yes," said Ross Haveril. "She is here, Bob. She came right away."

"Rosalie—" said Bob. Then, "No. She isn't here. She's gone—"

"She'll be right back, Bob. She's just gone to bring you a glass of water."

But Bob, still mumbling, seemed to know better. Two or three times he muttered, "No.—No."

Ross Haveril, under his breath and deep within his heart, said. "Damn the girl!" But he did more than that; he hurried out to find her, to drag her back if necessary.

He saw her standing motionless, irresolute, a small, slim figure making a dark blur in the darkness. She heard his swift oncoming tread, and started, and ran again, this time toward the horses which had brought her and Luke Oliver;

he heard Luke, who had just tied the horses outside the fence, say something.

Ross Haveril, running faster than she could, caught her at the gate.

"You come back!" he commanded angrily. "Bob wants you; he keeps asking for you."

She strove to writhe out of his clutch.

"I can't, I tell you! I won't! Let me go!"

"You're coming back to Bob—Damn you!" he flared out, and his heavy hands bit savagely into her convulsed shoulders. "Can't you see he's dying?"

"That's why!" She began beating at his face with her small fists which her passion made hard like wooden mallets. "I don't want to watch him die—I won't—"

"What's all this?" said Luke, looming close out of the dark.

"This little she-devil!" Ross stormed, his voice thick with fury. "She's got all the nerve of a Black Jack Devlin; you know her, you saw how she handled herself at the gambling joint tonight— And now she's pulling the timid little shrinking violet act. Bob's dying and wants her and the hell-cat can't stand the sight of him! What on earth a man like Bob Roberts can see in a hell's tabby like this—"

He flung her from him and slapped her face as she reeled into Luke's arms. Then he went back to his friend, and knew that he was going to him for the last time and that Bob was dying because of him—and that he, Ross Haveril, was powerless as death's black curtain came down, to do this one little last thing for Bob Roberts. To be sure, he had meant at first to drag the girl or to carry her kicking and squealing in his arms; better, though, to slap her and have done with her than set her in her selfish hysteria before failing eyes as their last earthly vision.

Bob was silent and still, but stirred ever so slighty at the sound of a faint footfall. This time he thought it was Rose who came to him.

Hard Ross Haveril felt a lump in his throat and his stern eyes went wet. Bob was speaking, quiet clearly now though so softly that his voice did not carry far; Ross had to stoop close to catch the words. Bob was talking to Rosalie Devlin. He was making love to her; he and she were

alone together, out in a tender wilderness dawn. The words which he was speaking—

Ross stiffened up and drew back, out of earshot. Bob was saying things he would want no one on earth to hear —except Rose Devlin. He smiled, it was a queer, crooked smile, hardly more definite than a flicker of light and shadow across his lips. He tried to lift his hand—to take Rose's hand in his—to take her into his arms.

He was telling Rose Devlin good-bye.

His young face, on this his "lucky night," was radiant.

Ross Haveril who would not eavesdrop, would not even watch. He swung about, turning his back.

Abruptly Bob Roberts ceased speaking. Haveril heard a long-drawn gasp. Then he turned and went back quietly to the sofa. The radiance was gone. As far as Bob Roberts was concerned, everything on earth was gone.

On the porch Haveril met Luke Oliver coming in.

"He's dead," Haveril said. "I'm going out to the barn to head that fellow off from riding for the doctor. I'll be right back."

"If you hadn't come back home tonight—" said Luke, and sounded as bitter as gar broth.

"Yes. Bob would be alive now," returned Haveril. He was building himself a cigarette with slow fingers. "While I'm out at the barn I'll get a wagon. We can't leave him here at Storm's. Where'll we take him, Luke?"

"Down to Liberty, I reckon. They've got a graveyard there and an undertaker and everything."

Tom Storm appeared suddenly, his figure shaping up in the dark before they heard him.

"That you, Luke?" he asked. And when Luke said, "Hello, Tom," Storm said, "There was another rider with you; just rode off. Who was it? Rose Devlin, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"What was she doing here? What did she want? What did she rush off for?"

"Bob, when we found him shot up on the ridge, asked for her."

"What about Bob now?"

"He's dead."

Storm didn't say anything. Ross Haveril finished rolling his cigarette and lighted it; the match flare, reddening his face, showed it granite hard.

"We want the loan of a wagon, Storm," he said.

"Sure," said Storm. "I'll get one of the boys to hitch up a team."

When Ross Haveril and Luke Oliver were on the wagon seat, their saddle horses tied at the tail end, Tom Storm came and put his hand in a front wheel and looked up at Haveril.

"The way things were tonight, Ross," he said. "I couldn't very well kick you off the ranch. But you're not welcome. Don't come again."

"I'll be back soon, Tom. Maybe tomorrow."

"Better not. I'm warning you. There's no business and there's no friendship between you and me."

"Luke has business with you," Ross told him. "I'm coming with him."

Then he and Luke went on their way, driving carefully. Tom Storm stood where he was a long while, watching the blur they made until it grew vague beyond recognition and the dark absorbed it. Before he stirred a quiet voice spoke to him from near by; someone had approached him with no more sound that he himself had made just now when he came to Ross and Luke.

"Tom, it's me," the voice said. "It's Strake. I want to talk with you."

"Damn you, Strake!'

"I can't help it," said Strake sullenly. "After what's happened I've got to talk to you. And nobody knows I'm here."

"All right," said Storm then. "Come on into the house."

He led the way; Strake kept close to him. Strake said, before they had gone half a dozen steps,

"It was you, wasn't it, Tom?"

"What are you talking about?" Storm snapped him up.

Strake, his sullen mood riding him, sounded as though he were talking with his teeth kept hard set. He said,

"In the fight tonight up there on High Flat—"

"You crazy fool!" Storm said, his voice rising in anger.

They went into the house and Storm closed the door behind him. The night being pleasantly warm, a window had

been left open; neither man noticed or thought about it. The first thing they noted, mirroring the lamplight, was the blood on the floor near the sofa. Tom Storm stood a moment scowling at it, then dragged a Navajo rug to throw over it.

"Well?" he demanded.

"I could do with a drink," said Bull Strake.

The two drank together. Storm had just set the glass aside and Bull Strake was taking his second helping, when a rap came at the door.

"Dammit," said Storm. "Is the whole world running in on me tonight?" He sang out, with no ring of welcome in his tone, "Come in!"

Valdez entered hurriedly.

CHAPTER XIII

"MY FRIEND!" exclaimed Valdez, and having entered hastily was all haste to proffer his small, well-kept hand from which—possibly because of the haste which marked him so tonight—he had failed to strip the gauntlet. "I began to worry. Now that I find you are all right, that you have suffered no ill effects from the cowardly blow from that ruffian Hannigan—"

Storm turned his back and went to a table for a cigar. Then he threw his big bulky body down into one of his deep red leather chairs.

"Worried about your good friend, were you?" he jeered at his visitor. "Why do you have to be such a damned liar, Valdez? If you'd worried about me you'd have been here hours ago. What's on your mind?"

Valdez stiffened his small slight body until he was more like a little rooster than ever, a cocky bantam about to crow. But before he had progressed beyond an explosive and indignant, *"Señor!"* Storm was speaking again. He said bluntly,

"You walked out when they put me down; you went about your business, whatever it was, and the devil knows it was crooked; later you did get to worrying, but not about me. You'd laugh your head off if I was dead. What

you thought was, I ran off and left my good friend Tom Storm, and if I didn't show up pretty soon with a mushy mouth full of palaver, he'll be sore as a boil—and I can't afford to have that *hombre* get mad."

Valdez, cloaked in full dignity, turned upon his host a pair of hard, bright, black eyes which were every whit as friendly as a snake's.

"I will not listen to such language from anyone, Señor!"

"Rats," said Storm. Then he began regarding his visitor narrowly. "I wonder where you've been and what you've been up to," he added thoughtfully.

Valdez had no intention of telling him that first of all he had gone to Secret Valley; let that fact slumber, as he thought that it did, between him and Ross Haveril alone. What he said, stringing his lies upon a thin thread of truth, was:

"When you were carried home I tarried a little while at the Mountain House; I wanted to learn, in your interests, what I could of the man who attacked you so viciously. Then, having been assured that you were not badly hurt, I stayed for a little while to lose my money." He made a wry face. "I lost it as usual with no great difficulty and started home. Nearly arrived at El Paraiso, I told myself that I could not sleep without making sure—"

"So you've just come up from Paradise Valley?" Storm's thick, powerful fingers tattooed on the arm of his chair. "You must have met Luke Oliver and Ross Haveril; they left here a little while ago on their way to Liberty."

Since Valdez had not ridden that road at all and hadn't been near his home, he was at a loss for any answer; embarked on a minor lie, he didn't see clearly which major one to take advantage of. From Secret Valley he had returned to the Mountain House; he had tarried there long enough to lose the two hundred dollars which he had in his pocket; thence he had headed along the old Ridge Trail shortly before Haveril and Luke Oliver reached Black Jack's place. That was not the generally traveled trail which they had taken later and along which Bull Strake and his companions and then Bob Roberts had ridden, but one keeping to the backbone of the ridge and leading straight south. He had traveled slowly, deep in thought,

of a black mood which craved solitude. From afar he had heard shots; he knew that somewhere on the other trail between the Mountain House and Lost Valley men were trying to kill one another. He even thought once that there drifted to him on the faint evening breeze the sound of angry shouting voices. And now he seemed to learn that the newcomer, Haveril, and Luke Oliver had had a hand in the affair.

"Well?" said Storm, and smiled curiously.

Valdez craved pardon. "I am sorry; I was thinking of something—what did you say about Oliver and Haveril?"

"They left here a little while ago. You must have met them. They were going your way, headed for Liberty. Got it? Or shall I say it again?"

"I did meet two men," said Valdez. "Who they were, I don't know. It was quite dark."

"You could not even make out the color of the horses they were riding, I suppose?" And now Storm was grinning.

"I did not even think to make out the color of their horses," said Valdez curtly. "Why should I?"

"They were in a wagon!" chuckled Storm. And then in a flash he grew sober and stern, and said hotly, "Damn you, Valdez! Why are you so cram-jam full of lies? A man lies the way you do only when he's got a lot to hide! Just let me catch you trying to put anything over on me, and you're done for. Have you got sense enough to know that?"

Valdez in turn bristled and his eyes were as hot and angry as Storm's. He said in a voice as smooth as silk,

"It is never wise to threaten, Mr. Storm. Sometimes it is not only unwise but dangerous."

All this while Bull Strake, standing over by the fireplace, had not said a word or moved a muscle beyond those small muscles which swung the eyes right and left; his intent gaze was always bent upon the face of the man who spoke until he had finished, then was boring into the other man. He gave every indication of a frank and lively interest.

"You know Strake here?" said Storm, passing over Valdez' brittle observation.

Valdez inclined his head perhaps the quarter of an inch.

"I have met Mr. Strake," he admitted without enthusiasm.

"Well, you're going to know him a lot better before you are much older," said Storm. "Bull Strake is a friend of mine." Valdez' sleek black brows rose ever so slightly but he didn't say anything. "Ross Haveril told me part of the story tonight," Storm went on. "Strake, dropping in later, told me a part. If you're wondering why Haveril and Oliver were headed for Liberty in a wagon, here's the answer: They are taking Bob Roberts along for his last ride."

This time Valdez' brows shot all the way up; he demanded swiftly:

"Bob Roberts— What happened?"

"He's dead!" said Storm.

"But—"

"Oh, yes, you saw him a little while ago and he was fine, and all that. Can't a man ever kick off without everybody cracking that chestnut? Somebody shot him."

"But who? And where? And why?"

"He butted into another man's fight—"

"Ross Haveril's! He did that before, tonight!"

"Some men followed Luke and Haveril from Black Jack's. They were headed this way; to see me. I suppose. Well, there was a fight pulled off up yonder on High Flats. Bob Roberts chipped in and as far as we know was the only one to get killed."

"I'm sorry about that," murmured Valdez, who obviously was not in the least sorry, caring nothing one way or another about Roberts, but was intrigued. Then he asked, centering his major interest in his question, "But what men followed Oliver and Haveril? And why? Luke hasn't any enemies that I know; has Haveril made enemies already?"

"Maybe," said Storm. "He makes enemies fast. Maybe not. The likely thing is it was something else." He looked at Strake. "How about it, Bull? Did Haveril have any money on him?"

Bull Strake, his eyes looking as hard and cold as glass, shrugged his beefy shoulders. Then he must have thought, "No use saying I don't know." So he tersely supplemented his shrug:

"Yes. He made a killing at roulette."

"How much?" asked Storm.

"Over fifty thousand."

"Fifty thousand dollars!" gasped Valdez. *"Caramba,* that's money." But he looked puzzled. "How could he gamble?" he asked. "He had no money—at least, he looked like a tramp!"

"It was Luke Oliver's money," said Strake sullenly. He was at best a man of few words; also, here was a thing he did not care to talk about. To get the thing done with he added, "What he won he gave to Luke. He filled his hat with it. He broke the bank. Black Jack said so, and men began to leave. I guess some of them followed Oliver and Haveril."

"How much of a stake did Luke hand him?" asked Storm.

"Four thousand, I think it was."

Valdez looked more amazed than ever.

"But Luke Oliver with four thousand dollars! When did he ever have money like that? Where could he get that much?"

A queer tight smile that was rightly no smile at all drifted across Tom Storm's lips.

"Where could he have gotten it? Haveril must have given it to him."

"But Señor, this Ross Haveril had nothing! You could tell that by looking at him! And if he did have it one would ask the same question about him: Where did he get it?"

"Who gives a damn!" said Storm. "Looted a bank, likely enough. That's the sort he is. But it wasn't just to jaw about Haveril and Luke and Bob Roberts that I told you to stop a minute, Valdez. That's part of it all right, and we'll get back to Ross Haveril in a minute, but first I want some plain talk with you that you won't like very much. We're going to say a word or two about a certain mortgage—and if you think you'll feel any better you can jabber your head off about a man named Willard Hale that a horse of mine savaged and killed some five or six years ago—and then we'll get around to the thing I'm chiefly interested in right now: That is, what became of the snug little fortune that your cute little niece Carmencita's grandfather left in trust for her?"

"Have you gone crazy then?" gasped Valdez. "I— Before God, Mr. Storm, I don't know what you mean!"

"I'll explain," said Storm, sounding patient, yet jeering at him with his eyes as he had done earlier.

Valdez ran a tongue along dry lips; his dark skin had turned a dirty white; in his eyes were both fury and fear.

"I am not interested in any explanation," he said at last, with Storm sitting there and waiting for him and staring at him. "I am going."

"You'll stay until I tell you you can go," said Storm. "If I have to floor you and sit on you, you'll stay until we talk these things out once and for all without any hedging; we'll spread all our cards out face up and have done with it."

Valdez knew that he couldn't go unless Storm permitted; he read in Storm's expression and in his tone that he meant literally what he said. So,

"For one thing," said Valdez—again the haughty hidalgo or bantam rooster—you could take your choice, "we are not alone, Señor."

"We're the way I want us to be," Storm informed him. "Haven't I said already that Bull Strake is a friend of mine? What I mean by that is that he needs me and I need him. As for you, Señor Don Francisco de Valdez y Verdugo y God-knows What Else, you need both of us. Come to think of it, if you did try to insist on going home I wouldn't have to get out of my chair to change your mind for you. All I'd do would be asking whether you've lost the one love of your sentimental and misspent life—whether you're ready to lose your valley that you call the earthly Paradise!"

A wicked malevolence gleamed in Valdez' narrowed eyes.

"You would never dare! There is something you are not to forget!" he spat back, bristling with threat.

Tom Storm only laughed at him; it wasn't pleasant laughter but of a brand that jerked into Francisco Valdez' eyes a look that was at once puzzled and fearful.

Storm turned from him to Strake and said, "Bull, in a minute Valdez is going to tell you that he suspects me of having murdered Willard Hale and of having put the blame for it in my stallion, Destruction!"

"It is not a thing that I suspect!" fumed Valdez, goaded at last beyond self-control. "It is a thing that I know—*Because I saw!*"

"What do you think of that, Bull?" asked Storm.

"I'll be damned!" said Bull Strake.

Any man looking at Valdez now could see that the man meant what he said. It was the truth. He had seen Tom Storm kill Willard Hale. That was a good six years ago, as Strake remembered. And all this while Valdez had kept his mouth shut! Why? Bull Strake would have liked to know. And in a minute he was going to know.

"Now!" said Tom Storm. He sat up straight with his two hands on the arms of his chair; he looked ready to leap to his feet but sat quietly still; his poise was as deadly as that of a coiled snake. "We are going to get somewhere." Again he addressed Strake: "What do you think, Bull of a man who sees another man commit a murder and then keeps still about it?"

"Likely he gets paid for keeping mum," said the practical Bull Strake.

"And if the word gets around," continued Storm, "that a man had kept mum in such a case and for such a reason, what are they apt to do to him?"

"I remember Lefty Barstow," said Strake. "He was in on the know when Corks Copley butchered old man Reese. When they hung Corks they strung Lefty up alongside him."

"Such things happen," nodded Storm. He transferred his gaze to Valdez; Valdez shuddered. "Maybe you remember about Corks Copley and Lefty Barstow, too," he said. "But never mind ancient history. We were going to talk about a mortgage. The record will show that I made you a loan of five thousand dollars quite a while ago; if folks check on dates they will find the loan was made the day after my horse trampled Hale to death. Not that there was any—"

"Have you gone crazy!" burst from Valdez in a voice that was so shrill as to be almost a scream. Again he looked at Bull Strake whose interest was as frank as a child's. "At least I'd think you'd want us to be private—"

"Not that there was any mortgage to begin with," Storm went on unheeding. "I just gave you a check, and you en-

dorsed and cashed it—and I've kept the check against a time like this. Later you wanted other sums, quite a few of them, *amigo mio,* and so the mortgage on Paradise Valley came into being. And you always said to yourself, 'What the hell! I've got the deadwood on Tom Storm; he'll never dare force me for a cent back.' But maybe I will. Maybe I'm ready right now to foreclose. Then again —maybe I might even tear the papers up, old checks and all, and call everything square."

"It's thirsty work listening, Storm," said Bull Strake. "Me, I want a drink. This bottle is dead."

"In the kitchen cupboard," said Storm. "Bring a fresh bottle."

When Strake brought bottle and glasses Valdez was the first to down his drink; he, more than the two others, looked to need it.

"Now!" said Storm as he had said once before. "Now for the other matter. You haven't told me yet what has happened to little Carmencita's inheritance—left in trust!"

"What I said was that I don't know what you mean," sputtered Valdez.

"There was about seventy-five thousand dollars of it, that's what I mean," Storm told him. "And it's gone now, that's what I mean. Every damned cent of it. Gone through your fingers across Black Jack's tables and across a string of tables down along the border. And little Carmencita never the wiser; nobody any the wiser except you—and then me—and now Bull Strake!"

"It's a lie! Perhaps a few unfortunate investments, conservative though they were—"

"You've had a bully good time playing me for a sucker," said Storm, stern and threatening, "and I've let you enjoy yourself all this time because you've been the sucker, and in the end I'm not losing a red cent but instead am making a good thing, what with interest piling up on my money, or, in place of that, Paradise Valley whenever I want to gather it in."

"You wouldn't dare! I tell you, you don't dare!"

"Because you'd rush off and tell the world that I killed a man and that you saw it happen? Don't make me laugh! What the hell could you prove, man? It would just be

your word against mine. And when it came out that you owed me a lot of money and were trying to wriggle out of paying it, and when on top of that you were exposed as an embezzler who had stolen your own niece's seventy-five thousand, how much do you think that your words would weigh? Better have another drink and get the hair out of your eyes."

Valdez, clearly as nervous as a cat by now, did gulp down another drink, and he did actually run his fingers through his hair, pushing it back from his forehead without in the least knowing what he was doing.

For the first time Bull Strake laughed. He was a man who seldom laughed, and it was quite as well, for the sound of his mirth was as dry and unpleasant as the rubbing together of two sheets of sandpaper, as hard on sensitive nerves as ever was a youngster's slate pencil squeaking on his slate.

Valdez didn't say anything; he didn't even mark Bull Strake's laugh; he was trying desperately to think and was finding that the hardest work he had ever done.

So Tom Storm went on with what he had in mind.

"Now we get back to Ross Haveril as I said we would. He is going to make trouble, but that isn't what he came for, because he didn't know that I was here. I've known Ross Haveril a long time; I know that he was born and raised as a kid in Secret Valley. He always planned, when he lined his pockets, to come back. Luke Oliver owns Secret Valley now; it will be Haveril's before another day is past. But Haveril's dream is bigger than just the old Haveril home; he has the same hunch that some of the rest of us have had. He wants my valley and he wants Paradise Valley, too. He is going to find out that I hold a mortgage on Paradise Valley that Valdez can't pay off; he is going to try to buy that mortgage from me. And he is going to try to squeeze me out of Lost Valley. He has all this in his head when I knew him down in South America." Storm looked to be moodily thoughtful during a hushed moment; then he said, staring at Valdez, "I could save myself a lot of grief if I turned over your mortgage to him. He'd have you kicked out in no time, and might forget to worry about Lost Valley for a while."

"Why didn't you burn him down tonight while you had the chance?" asked the practical Bull Strake.

And Valdez' thought was, "But what you suggest would take a lot of money! Has this man Haveril, who looks like a tramp—"

"He's got money, and don't you forget it," said Storm as one who knew. "He's a hard-headed devil and he's a lucky devil, and he swore years ago that he was damned if he ever came back here until he could do just what I say. Well, let's get along; there are two points left hanging, and here they come: First, my good Señor Valdez, I'm going to marry your little niece, Carmencita. That's agreed, isn't it?"

Strake started as though a pin had been stuck into him and his jaw dropped. Valdez, about to agree with alacrity, bethought him of his trampled dignity and for the last time that night struck his bantam rooster attitude. He said loftily,

"Until you took it upon yourself, Señor, to address me as you have tonight, I had hoped—"

"Oh, chuck your stand-offish pride overboard," said Storm in digust. "It's mildewed and spoiled anyhow, just so much garbage. As I say, I marry Carmencita, and marry her right off; within a week at longest."

Bull Strake broke in then to mutter,

"Dammit, Storm, I thought Black Jack's girl—"

"Leave her out of it! Hear me?" said Storm in sudden anger.

Then he settled back in his chair and slowly relaxed while his chest swelled to a deep intake of air; the great brutal fingers which just now had so deeply indented the red leather of the chair's arms began beating a slow tattoo and then were quiet.

"When Carmencita is my wife," he said to Valdez, "you and I both begin to get what we want. You'll never lift your voice against your own niece's husband; not because you care the snap of your fingers for her, but because of your crazy 'pride'—though what in hell you've got to be proud of is beyond me. For my part, when I marry her, I marry Paradise Valley. And I want Paradise Valley and mean to have it. Later we'll see about Secret Valley."

He paused a moment, letting his words sink in, watching Valdez stonily with challenging eyes. Valdez seemed about to speak but didn't say anything. He took out his handkerchief and ran it across his brow; he was white and looked sick. A contemptuous smile touched Tom Storm's lips, but they stiffened back into their habitual sternness as again he took up his theme.

"And now we come back again to Ross Haveril. If he's left to run hogwild he's going to make trouble; trouble for me, to begin with, and it will bounce along to you. So Haveril has got to be nipped in the bud." He glanced at Bull Strake. "That's where you come in, Bull."

Strake, never moving a muscle, looked ready to listen. Valdez at last looked relieved. He exclaimed,

"Whatever your plans are for this Haveril, I do not need to know about them. It is for you and your friend here. If you want to talk about such things— Well, I am going!"

"Keep your shirt tail in, Valdez," said Storm coolly. "I haven't finished yet. When you're in on a deal with me, you're in all the way, square up to your ears. I've said Bull Strake and I need each other; well, we need you, too!"

"I'm not going to be a party to—a party to—"

"Finish it!" jeered Storm. "Put a name to it. Its right name."

Once more a tremor rippled over the little man's body and again Bull Strake was amused; this time he almost laughed.

"Listen," said Storm. "Here's where you come in. Here's what you are going to do. Your part's the easiest, but you'll be in as deep as we will. Listen."

Valdez, never more black-beetle-like than now—like a beetle impaled on a pin—listened.

And someone else listened and had been listening all along, someone swept along from incredulity to amazement, to consternation, to icy horror. For when Valdez, leaving Secret Valley returned to the Mountain House, so did Carmencita, with an expostulating Romero trailing after her. Again she had peered in at the windows, fascinated, running to hide when men came and went. And

when Valdez had started home, again she and Romero, had followed far behind.

Then at Storm's house someone had left a window open.

A frantic Romero had stayed with the horses apart. Carmencita, ten thousand wild suspicions and dreads writhing within her and none of them worse than the truth she came to learn, listened with all her ears.

. . . When she started running back to Romero she felt as though it were someone else's body she was goading into full flight, so numb with terror was she, her legs like lead, her heart suffocating her.

"Romero—Romero! Oh, dear God! Help me, Romero! Hurry, hurry, *hurry!* We must get home first— Never, never tell, Romero! Swear it before God!—*Romero, hurry!*"

Once in the saddle she clutched the horn and spurred her horse into top speed, the mystified and frightened Romero hard beset to keep her in sight. At the hacienda she crept in the back way; she crept silently to her room in stocking feet; she locked her door; she did not dare have a light; through the long hours before the first glint of day she feared a hundred times that she would go mad, that she would burst out screaming and wake the house.

CHAPTER XIV

IT WAS LONG after dark the next night when Ross Haveril, drawn-faced and heavy-browed, rode back alone to Secret Valley. Moving slowly, with a strange machine-like leisureliness, he unsaddled, tended to his horse and went to the ranch house; a trail of light showed the way, fanning out through the window.

Luke Oliver had already had supper at the bunkhouse, then had come over here to wait for Ross; he was sucking at a pipe that had long ago gone dead, he was in sock feet, rubbing his two big toes together; a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles perched jauntily on the high bridge of his nose; his brows, too, were drawn but after a different style, as he concentrated over his present occupation. He was sewing; two or three needles, ranging from two to six inches in length, lay beside a spool of pack thread on the table hold-

ing the lamp. He was putting a patch into the seat of a disreputable looking pair of overalls, and a bridle with a broken rein lay on the floor beside him, awaiting his convenience.

From just inside the door Ross Haveril, snorting, remarked,

"Nice little homey touch, I'll tell a man. It's like being married, to come in and find the busy housewife making things cozy."

"You go to hell," said Luke, and sank a needle deep into the ball of his thumb and cursed like a deep sea sailor.

Ross sat down on a bench against the wall and rested his forearms on his knees and, head down, seemed to be studying a thumb nail which its brother thumb nail was slowly and methodically circumnavigating. Luke looked at him over his crookedly set spectacles, lifting his shaggy brows the better to do so—just looked and did a bit of wondering, and waited.

They had returned in the late afternoon from Liberty, having done there all they could for Bob Roberts; they had hired a boy at the livery stable to drive Tom Storm's team home, returning his wagon and, unmentioned, a rifle of his which Luke had taken without a by-your-leave from its place behind the Lost Valley kitchen door. Luke, wise old owl that he was, had argued that the crowd which had attacked them once might try again, and an unsuspected rifle was a nice little ace in the hole. Ross had gone to the bank, deposited the money he had on him and thereafter the two had ridden out of Liberty on their own horses, homeward bound.

But before they came to the place where the trail split in two, one was leading on to Secret Valley, and the other to the ridge which broke down into High Flats, they had separated.

"I'm going to do a little riding on my own, Luke," young Haveril had said. "I want to look around up there where Bob was shot. I'll join you at the ranch."

"Not dropping in on Tom Storm again, are you?" Luke had asked suspiciously.

"Not tonight," Ross assured him. "We'll go together again, maybe tomorrow."

So now, after some hours apart, they sat for a while in silence, Ross busying one thumb nail against the other, Luke measuring him over his spectacles.

In a big barn-like room like this, lit by a single smoky lamp, there is little light and there are shadows everywhere, and they are crazy, grotesque, fantastic shadows that seem alive; as the uncertain flame in the blackened chimney flickers and wavers and sends up little spears of red fire where the wick is burnt, the shadows stir and seem to pulse and breathe and crawl. Luke's gnarled hands under the lamp made a shadow on the floor that was like an enormous black tarantula just beginning to move, moving ever so gradually, perhaps about to jerk into swift action upon its prey. Behind Ross Haveril on the wall was a crouching, misshapen giant, an ugly and sinister and menacing monstrosity.

From without, constituting but a gentle disturbance of an almost overwhelming stillness, came the croaking of frogs down in the damp meadows below the dam, and there was a muted and infrequent tinkle of a cow-bell, and these sounds had somehow the effect of making the night seem stiller, of throwing its hush into mild and accordant contrast and of emphasizing the ranch's solitude and remoteness from all the rest of the world.

"Remember old Barney?" asked Luke quietly.

"Barney?" At first Ross Haveril didn't remember, then he did. Barney had been called old Barney when Ross was a boy; old Barney, if still alive, must be about thirty years old now.

"The first horse I ever rode, I think," said Ross. "Bareback. When I used to fall off he'd stand there; he'd look over his shoulder disgustedly, then start eating grass."

"You might say howdy to him in the morning," said Luke, and resumed patching his overalls. "He's on his last legs now. That's why the bell on him. I hear it times at night, like now, and that way I know he's still alive. He likes to hang around the house. He's comfortable though; he's still got good teeth, though sort of worn down; he likes to lay in the sun and watch goings-on."

"I guess he knows?"

"Sure he knows! An old horse like him always knows."

There came another faint tinkle, but it sounded nearer. Luke smiled. "He's sure proud of that bell," he said.

After a while Ross looked up and the two men's eyes met in a quiet, steady gaze.

"I did a bit of back-tracking along the trail where Bob was shot last night," said Ross Haveril. "I found the place where the man that shot him was hid. He had come up the other way from the upper end of Lost Valley, on the old wagon road that passes the place where the old Balbriggan shanty used to be. After he shot Bob he rode back that same way. Bull Strake and his crowd didn't gang up with him. They rode straight on, heading toward the pass from the low side."

"Where'd he go on to, the feller that shot Bob? Back down into Lost Valley—and then which way?"

"I don't know where he went, but we'll find out, you to help me," said Ross. "Here's the way it was—"

He had found recent signs in trampled fresh grass where the hidden man had sat a restive horse for some minutes; from this spot he had found tracks, deeply gouged by racing hoofs, and had followed them slowly, his eyes on the ground. Thus before he had ridden five minutes he had noted a rusty-brown smear spattered in a bit of gray granite that was almost white, and had dismounted and made out that the stain was dried blood. After that there was a trail of blood; he had wondered how a man could bleed like that and still keep his seat on a running horse.

The trail led him through a scattering of timber on the upper end of High Flats, then across a bit of open mountain meadow and then straight toward the cliffs which marked the rim of the benchland and dropped steeply down some two or three hundred feet. And there all sign ended.

"Sing me to sleep!" gasped Luke Oliver, and his eyes looked as round as his glasses. "You mean to tell me he rode straight out into the air?"

"I could see from the edge, looking down," said Ross, "where the horse had hit and rolled and then slid to the bottom. Then I saw the horse lying down there, half hid in the brush."

Ross had then ridden along the old road until it brought

him down to the base of the cliffs a couple of miles farther on and there had doubled back until at last he made his way to the dead animal.

"And then I understood the blood-trail," he said. "The horse had been shot in our mix-up, not the rider. A bullet had struck him in the forepart of the shoulder and had made a long deep gouge, then had nicked his throat; you wouldn't have thought he could run that far. But the poor devil had to run; his sides were ripped open with the spurring he'd got. By the time he got to the edge of the cliffs that horse must have been mighty tottery on his legs. Next his rider gets down, yanks off saddle and bridle, gets his horse right on the dizzy edge—and pops a bullet through his brain. One good heave sent him over, dead before he hit the rocks."

"Saddle and bridle gone, huh? Any marks on the horse, Kid?"

"No marks, Luke."

"What sort of horse?"

"A dark bay. Looked like a good animal in good shape; six years old maybe. You're coming along with me tomorrow; the chances are that you'll know whose horse."

Luke nodded. "I ought to, I guess. Anyhow we'll go have a look-see."

"I'll tell you ahead what you'll find out, old timer. That it's a Lost Valley horse; that it belonged to Tom Storm."

"You mean it was Storm that was hid up there? That it was Storm killed Bob?"

"I'll tell you something, Luke; it's something I didn't think anything about last night, having something else worrying me. When I got Bob down to Lost Valley there wasn't anybody in the house; lights were burning but there wasn't anybody there. I went outside to get help; I guess I was running when I came by the barn. In the dark I bumped into someone hurrying pretty near as fast as I was. He was carrying a saddle; I got all tangled up with it. And it was Tom Storm."

"Hm," said Luke after meditating. And then, "Looks kind of bad, but just because he was carrying a saddle don't cinch any proof on him, does it?"

"I wish you could have seen Storm's face when he came

on into the house and saw Bob lying there on his sofa! Tom's a hard man to move, Luke; just the same he turned sick-white for a minute and goggled like a man seeing things."

"I got you, Kid," said Luke slowly. "You mean if a feller shoots a man somewheres out in the woods and then comes home and finds him lying on his own parlor settee, he's apt to look like Storm did?"

"You've told me yourself that Storm and Bob hated each other like poison. It's all on account of that damn little hell-cat of Jack Devin's, I suppose? It gets my Dutch up, Luke to think of a fine man like Bob Roberts going down underground for the likes of that infernal little—"

"Bear down easy on her, Kid," Luke cut in sharply. "She's not so bad; she's pretty damn fine in most things. Considering she's had Black Jack Devlin for mother and father both, why, I'd say she was aces."

"She ran out on Bob when he was dying!"

"Folks are funny," mused Luke tolerantly. "You never can tell. I heard of a lion tamer once, a big husky that folks said wasn't afraid of all hell on wheels—and just the same a spider would scare him purt' near out of his britches. Rose Devlin has got all the nerve of her old man, all the nerve of a brass monkey—but when it comes to watching a man die— Why, she just couldn't. I bet she felt worse over that than anything that ever happened to her, and I bet she feels worse about it now than she felt then. Only she couldn't wangle it."

Ross got up and stirred about restlessly. Once he said, "I wish you had gone with me this afternoon," and once he said, "I wish it was daylight," and then, "I'm hungry. What's to eat, Luke?"

"Nothing in this shack, Kid. Come over to my place."

"You go ahead, Luke, and let's see what you can dig out. I'll be over right away."

Luke dropped his sewing, stood up and shook the kinks out of his legs and went out. Two or three minutes later Ross Haveril followed him. But he went out of his way to come to the bunkhouse; he stood listening a moment, then headed through the dark toward one of the big oak

trees from under the low, thick branches of which came the faint tinkle of a cow-bell.

He found old Barney standing close to the tree, leaning one high bony shoulder against it. Ross said softly, "Hello, Barney, old boy. Remember me?" He wreathed one hand in the thinning mane, and said again, "Hello, Barney, old boy."

Old Barney tossed up his head and shook it feebly; then he moved his head slowly closer; it just brushed Ross Haveril's shoulder. Then old Barney snorted and after the snort began to nibble daintily at Ross's sleeve. And Ross said, "You old son-of-a-gun!" He patted the lean shoulder and said, "See you in the morning, old boy," and went on toward the bunkhouse. The bell tinkled after him, louder than he had yet heard it; a sudden tremulous neigh sounded through the night's silence. "The old devil!" Ross said to himself. You bet, he'd see old Barney in the morning. But he didn't know then what perhaps old Barney did know: When the sun came up again old Barney was dead.

In the bunkhouse, a place indescribably untidy and comfortable, Ross found Luke Oliver making a batch of fresh biscuits. In a corner cupboard were tins to delight a hungry man's heart; beans and tomatoes and other similar delicacies. Pretty soon steaming coffee wafted its aroma far and wide and made everything absolutely just right.

"Luke, young feller," said Ross when he had squared around to the table, "you and I haven't talked turkey yet. There's that mortgage that Tom Storm holds, and then there's the fact that you own Secret Valley and that I want it and am ready to pay for it."

"Funny," said Luke. He drew up his own chair and got his pipe first wheezing, then bubbling and finally behaving like a parlor Vesuvius. "Funny how it seems as though you'd been back a long time, and what with one thing and another coming up you ain't ever got around to answering a question I asked when you first come. I sort of hankered, before you and me talked turkey, to know what bank you robbed. Or was it the mint?"

"You sanctimonious old sockdodger!" Ross grinned at him. "Since when have you been so you wouldn't touch a

dollar unless it was scrubbed with soap and sandpaper first, then sent along all wrapped up in its pedigree?"

"How do I know what for a man you've turned out to be during these last few harum-scarum years?" Luke demanded, and was in dead earnest. "If it's money that some sheriff is on the trail of, I don't want some, thanks."

"You think, Luke, damn you, that maybe I'm a thief, huh?" said Haveril. The twinkle was still in his eye.

Luke snorted. "Hell, *no!* You're still a Haveril, ain't you, no matter what else maybe you've turned into. But a highway robber? That's different. Me, I wouldn't know. Not unless you told me."

"I never called you a liar yet, did I?" said Luke and was bristling indignant.

Ross Haveril burst out in one of those thundering laughs of his and swung out a long arm to pound Luke on the shoulder.

"All right, Nosey Bill, I'll tell you."

And in twenty minutes Ross sketched a good bit of his life during the last dozen years. He mentioned Tom Storm casually, since Tom was a part of the story; Tom and Willard Hale. He had already given a hint of this; he amplified only as much as was necessary to put Luke Oliver's mind at rest. When Tom Storm and Willard Hale had decamped, they had taken all the ready and available cash; they had sold certain mineral rights which remained in their three names, taking the simple way of adding a dash of crude yet effective forgery to their other crimes; they had left him, as they thought, without one copper coin to rub against another.

Yet he had held on to a couple of their string of claims which the three had pretty well agreed were worthless. At first he had tried to follow Storm and Hale; without funds as he was and having no remotest idea where they had headed, he promptly saw that he was, through that rage which upsets a man's reason, making a fool of himself. He returned to his claims and after six months of painful yet always stubborn endeavor, hit color.

It was not much, but it was something. It gave him ammunition for a fresh skirmish with a destiny which had seemed all armed hostility. Thereafter he lived through

what at the time seemed an endless period of lean years and fat years, and the streaks of lean were wider and thicker and more frequent than the streaks of fat.

He saw a lot of South America during those years when it was gold and silver that he hunted, not caring where he went, how far into the rugged mountain country, led by any rumor; and as time passed he found himself always moving northward until he knew Central America from end to end—and finally reached Mexico—

"And, of all things," said Ross, "struck oil. And that's how the long green in the money belt. Luke. And there's more just like it."

"A fool for luck," commented Luke at the end. "That's the Haveril in you."

A fool for luck! Ross Haveril didn't say anything, but a wry smile touched his lips as he thought back over those ten years, years that a score of times had had him beaten to his knees, years that had both broken his heart for him and then mended it as—he had thought a time or two—a ministering physician might work patiently upon a man to have him in good shape against the day that had been set for his hanging. He shrugged and went on with his meal.

Luke didn't miss much, and saw that twisting of the young man's mouth, and thought, "The Kid's had tough going, but it didn't down him and he's come out right—and I wish to hell ma could be here right now to take a slant at him—and at that, how the hell do I know? Maybe she is!"

To Ross he said, "You pay the mortgage and take the damn ranch. Me, I'm sick of it anyhow. It's never done a thing for me but put blisters on my hands and cricks in my back and holes in my pockets. I'd of given it up, look at it any way you please, and to Tom Storm! I'm through. It's yours if you want it."

"Fine," said Ross Haveril, and pretended to be serious, nodding his head and adding, "Thanks, Luke. That's what I thought you'd say. Thanks a lot, old timer."

He voiced his thanks as he might have done had Luke handed him a drink or a cigarette. Luke looked at him, and around Luke's eyes came, despite him, queer little

puckers. Ross Haveril's face was as grave and as humorless as a wooden Indian's. Why, the yeller, egg-sucking pup!

Just the same, all of a sudden Luke Oliver knew, and this time it was Luke who began to laugh. He surged to his feet, leaned across the table and knocked Ross's hat off, stamped on it once, then lifted it to the rafters with the toe of his boot.

"Why, you yeller, egg-sucking pup!" cried Luke joyously.

Ross Haveril's laughter and Luke Oliver's made a very pleasant sounding duet. Maybe old Barney out under the oak heard it; there was a faint tinkle.

Then together Ross and Luke remembered Bob Roberts and the laughter went out of them. They didn't look at each other. Ross shoved his plate away and made a cigarette. Luke got his pipe going again. They sat in silence, smoking.

In the early, sweet, cool green-summer morning they rode up over the Ridge, down to High Flats and on to the base of the cliffs where Ross Haveril had found the dead horse. When they got there the sun was well up, the sky filled with light, long golden rays busy everywhere chasing shadows away. Their horses fought their bits, getting a whiff of death, but finally, though snorting mightily, were reined and spurred close to the spot Ross had sought out.

He and Luke sat silent in their saddles looking down; when they raised their eyes to look at each other, they wheeled about and rode away. They had not tarried; they had no thought to dismount. There was no use. Here was a horse that could never be identified. During the night its rider had come back and had laboriously removed the animal's skin. Neither Luke, who knew most horses hereabouts as some men know all their human neighbors, nor any other man save alone the one who had ridden the animal, could know what horse this was. After they had ridden a while Luke said,

"He's a smart cuss, Kid. He's using his head. He'll be hard to ketch."

"Yes, he's smart. Maybe too smart, though. Maybe he's outsmarted himself. Look, Luke: The fact that he ripped

the hide off means that he's our man. And it means something else. Either he hid around all day yesterday, waiting for night to come back in, or else he lives pretty close by."

"You mean Tom Storm, of course," said Luke. "Well, maybe. I wouldn't be surprised. Just the same we ain't altogether dead sure, Kid. You got to keep your shirt on."

Ross Haveril didn't say anything. And as the two turned homeward they kept pretty still tongues in their heads.

This time, as they passed the Mountain House, smoke was rising from a chimney and a still, slight figure was standing on the porch leaning against one of the log columns supporting the roof. As they rode closer they saw it was Rose Devlin. They stopped their horses, Luke Oliver to say a cheery good morning, Ross Haveril just to look at her.

Her face was pale, her eyes were pink-rimmed and swollen from crying.

"You ought to go and hide yourself," said Ross Haveril angrily. "You ought to go and hide until people forget about Bob Roberts. Oh, they'll all forget; folks don't remember things like that long. But how about you?"

Her eyes drifted to a meeting with his, drifted away and he could make nothing of them. But he did see how her eyelids came slowly down. He started to speak again, but Luke Oliver said, "You shut your mouth, Ross," and the two passed on just as Black Jack Devlin came out on the porch.

CHAPTER XV

ROSE DEVLIN'S eyelids, closing down so slightly, had squeezed out two tears to roll down her cheecks. At the sound of her father's step behind her she brushed the tears away with the backs of her fingers; she did not turn toward him but her eyes, open now and dark with suffering, followed the two horsemen until they went out of sight, down among the pines on the flank of the ridge.

"Luke Oliver and that Haveril fellow?" asked Black Jack Devlin.

Still without turning, she nodded. Her nod was a weary, lifeless gesture, not at all like Rose Devlin on a gay morn-

ing like this. Devlin, stopping at her side without drawing her eyes to him, asked his other question:

"What was Haveril saying to you?"

She lifted her shoulders in the way that means, "Oh, what difference does it make?" In that spiritless way that means, "What difference does anything make?"

He knew that for the first time in her life the lilting tip-toe spirit had been crushed down within her; he knew that she had slept little or not at all last night but had been restless, savagely torn, crying bitterly; and that all day today, too, it had been that way with her. He looked at her, seeing only the round of her cheek, and looked away only to look at her again.

"Look here, Kid," he said after a while, "did you love Bob after all?"

"Yes, I loved him." She spoke quietly and steadily enough but her voice, like herself, seemed somehow far away, as though hushed as well by remoteness as by the weight upon her. "I know now that he was the finest man that ever came here, the finest man I ever knew. He was somehow—clean and strong and fine. Yes, I loved Bob—but I wasn't in love with him."

Devlin looked relieved.

"I know what you mean."

"Do you?" She wondered. She was wondering today about a lot of things; about herself mostly, and for the first time; but about a lot of things. She said as though speaking to herself instead of to him, as perhaps she was: "Why did Ross Haveril have to come back last night? Why did he have to play and win? If he hadn't—Bob would be alive now."

"Damn him," said Black Jack, and displayed through his tone rather more emotion than he usually permitted himself to do. "He ought to be booted out of the country—and he will be, too, once I've got my money back from him. There are two kinds of Haverils; I've known them of old. He is the Haveril riffraff, bum, trouble-maker. When he first came—"

"When he came—it was like a storm wind. Like the storm winds that go raging through the mountains, bending and breaking big pine trees. Yes, he makes trouble—

but his eyes were as clear as daylight. Ross Haveril is not a bum, Jack, and you know it. If there are riffraff Haverils, he is not one of them."

Had she been looking at him his face would have remained his habitual mask. But now an expression of perplexity, an anxious sort of perplexity, darkened it.

"I don't quite get you today, Kid," he said lightly enough. "You told me last night he swore at you, he even put his damned hands on you—"

"He slapped my face. I was so angry then that when I got home I blabbed to you. Now? I wish to God he had slapped me harder!"

"No, I don't quite get you. You mean to tell me that after that you don't hate the ground he walks on?"

"Hate? I couldn't hate a storm, could I? Not even if it knocked all the trees down and carried our house away and tumbled the mountains down into the canyons. I might be afraid; I might run and try to hide—but hate it? No."

He laughed softly and patted her shoulder; that seemed the best way to treat her, to make light of this fantastic mood of hers.

"Look out, Miss Devlin, or you'll be making him out as fine a man as you say Bob was!"

"Maybe he is! How do we know? What do we know about him? He and Bob were friends; theirs was a friendship that Bob died for. Maybe Ross Haveril would have died for Bob, had things been the other way."

"Well," said Black Jack.

"And I," said Rose, and at last turned and looked into her father's eyes, "am just the hell-cat he called me. And worse than that, a nasty, slinking coward."

"You're not! You are nothing of the kind. But I'll tell you what you are; you're upset, that's all. You had no sleep last night—"

"If there had been one little thin thread of—of decency in me I would have been with Bob when he died. That's something for me to remember!"

"I tell you—"

"No! I tell you!" A new hot brightness was in her eyes then, a hot dry brightness with no softening of tears. "Bob

is dead. Bull Strake killed him. He is dead because he interfered when Bull Strake tried to kill and rob his friend. And you sent Strake after Ross Haveril and his money. I saw Strake look at you. I saw you look back at Strake. And so Bob had to die—and he sent for me—and I didn't go to him."

Devlin trimmed and lighted a cigar before he said a word. There was no use telling his daughter that she did not know what she was talking about; she did know. Instead he said,

"Bull Strake is a fool. I did not mean for him to kill anybody. You know that as well as I do. He just lost his head—that was a lot of money for a man like Bull Strake to think about."

She let her eyes drift away while he was talking. His were clear and looked frank and honest, but she knew he lied.

"You are right, Jack, saying I am upset," she said, again listless, nothing mattering. "Maybe I will go away; you wanted me to yesterday; before all this happened. Oh, I know we are short of money now! We are broke, aren't we?"

He could laugh at that, without pretense. Hadn't Black Jack Devlin known what it was to be broke off-and-on all his life?

"Why shouldn't I marry Tom Storm?" the girl said swiftly.

"Look here! Has Storm asked you to marry him?"

Now it seemed her turn to laugh. But he didn't like the sound of her laughter, it was so hard and bright and brittle.

"What's got into you, Kid?" he demanded. "You know damned well that I won't have you marrying any man unless you love him. Do you love Tom Storm like that?"

"Love? What is love—like that, Jack Devlin? Do you know?"

"Maybe not," said Black Jack tonelessly.

On the other hand maybe he did know. As he looked at his daughter now he thought, as he often did, of Evelyn Dayton, the minister's daughter over at Cherokee the first time he ever saw her. Fairer than Rose Devlin she was, slighter and always with a look of immaturity about her

even after she was Rose's mother and Rose was four years old. Anyhow, whether or not he knew what love was, he had been good to his frail girl wife; when she had died, a victim of a hard winter when pneumonia carried off many of the weaker ones in the mountains, she had left behind her an emptiness that time had never filled. Since that first time he saw her Black Jack Devlin had never looked at another woman, and there had been many a handsome girl who had smiled his way invitingly.

Black Jack moved along, taking his morning stroll on the porch that extended along three sides of the house, pausing on the west side to look down into Lost Valley, hanging briefly on his heel at the south to look down into what could be seen from here of Paradise Valley, moving on again until from the east he could catch through the tops of his pines intriguing glimpses of Secret Valley. Down there, in the Haveril lands, he could see the cliffs at the northern end with their black forest growth and with the white veils of tumbling waterfalls where they flaunted banner-like against the dark rock and lost themselves in mist behind a timber screen long before they dipped into the glassy pools five hundred feet below their beginnings.

Out of the corner of his eye he watched Rose-alba stepping with none of her wonted lively tread but drifting as listless as any light breeze-blown leaf down into the yard. She moved slowly away from the house along the ridge, and from the manner of her walk he knew that she wasn't going anywhere; she hadn't even thought about going anywhere. It is doubtful that she saw the ground underfoot or the still, tall trees ahead of her. She just wanted to be alone, utterly alone, and perhaps did not even have the conscious thought of that. Well, it would do her good.

Her feet followed a dim trail wriggling through the pines; she passed from sunlight into shadow, a sort of greenish twilight, and soon felt herself alone as she wanted to be, with the vast stillness of the forest pressing in closer and still closer about her until its silence was like the silence made audible in a sea shell. She put back her head and looked straight up through the pine branches at the occasional broken patches of deep blue sky and in her eyes, so wide open now, were both pain and sorrowful specula-

tion. She kept thinking about Bob, and how fine he had truly been, how always he had treated her as no other man ever had, and how he was dead now, and how those deep blue patches of sky up there were just as gloriously, softly blue, just as serene. She murmured his name, "Bob!" and then said to herself, "I wish I had loved him! I wish we had loved each other and had gone away before that had to happen!" This was the first time in her life—she had no memory of her mother—that death had struck so close.

The path, overlaid inches thick with brown pine needles, kept to the spine of the ridge, and at last she knew where her feet were taking her. There was a rock which rose dizzily like a battered and broken spire and which for some reason which she did not know was called Faraway Rock. It was hard to scale unless you knew the proper way, and dangerous, too, unless you knew, but at the very top there was a flat place as wide as a small room where the climber could rest and give himself up to a secure solitude. Here she was above the pine tops; from here she had looked through many a mellow sunset and through even some infrequent dawns over what in her young eyes extended like a large section of the world. Faraway Rock gave all the extended view that the porch of the Mountain House gave, and more.

Thinking still of Bob Roberts dead, she stood very still, only her loose hair faintly stirred by the merest whisper of a breeze, looking out across a far blue southern distance, across descending ridges and valleys sloping down into an immense stretch of level lands, and beyond that into a haze wherein land and sky melted and were fused—where Liberty was. And from thinking of Bob she began thinking of herself, as is the way with youth and with much of riper maturity; thinking not of Bob dead but of herself and death, two things this strong green-summer morning that were farther set apart than the poles, yet two things which drew steadily nearer with every breath she drew. She remembered when she was a very little girl how Hannigan had told her once, "Every time you draw in your breath and let it out somebody, somewhere in the world, will die," and how she had held her breath as long as she could, her heart faintly fearful and touched with a child's tenderness

of pity, that no one need die right then. She was a child now as she said aloud so that her own words were in her ears, "Oh God, why do we all have to die?" She put her face in her hands and shivered, afraid.

After a while, looking into the nearer distance down in the low foothills where glimpses of the wagon road could be caught winding gradually upward from down Liberty-way, she saw the wagons coming and her wandering thoughts were snared back to earth and everyday. They were four-horse teams, three of them, and the horses were straining with their loads; where the grades steepened the drivers now and then slammed on their brakes, holding the wagons from rolling back down hill, breathing their horses.

Then she saw still another wagon, much nearer, far ahead of the others, when it came curving around a wooded bend and headed into Secret Valley. One could not but wonder what it meant, this unaccustomed freighting into a valley into which so few teams had come during the years she could remember. Suddenly she understood: A Haveril had returned and meant to stay. Ross Haveril had been in Liberty yesterday; he had lost no time, she thought bitterly; he had cast Bob, newly dead, into his grave and had gone about his business. No doubt these teams had started out yesterday; they had camped somewhere along the road, to arrive so early. A Haveril had come back to his valley in his mountains, and he had money in his pockets; and here came men and horses and supplies; here came fresh new life to drowsing old Secret Valley. Turning a little, she could even see old Haveril house, a gray blot upon the lovely valley's verdure like a piece of lichen on a mossy-green rock. There would be lumber on those wagons; there was going to be rebuilding and then would come re-stocking—and Ross Haveril, who would have done so much better to have died down there in South America and to have let Bob Roberts go on living, was here to stay—

And she began wondering where and when and how she was going to meet him again. Waves of anger flooded through her; she clenched her hands at her sides and her teeth bit together hard. And yet—and that angered her too!—she experienced a quick flick of interest. She stood there a long time looking, but when she realized that she

was no longer watching the straining teams but was looking down into the higher valley itself and at the house and fields about it and was wondering whether she could see him from here, she suddenly turned her back on all that. She looked off again toward Liberty lost in the far blue haze, and then slowly made her way down from her high place atop Faraway. As she descended, despite the command she laid upon them, her eyes drifted toward the old gray house.

At the base of the rock where the dim trail ran both ways, back to the Mountain House, and on into the forest and down the slope of the ridge, she met Carmencita Valdez. Neighbors as they were, with but a few mountain miles between their homes, and of an age, they had never met before. Two nights ago Carmencita had seen Rose Devlin for the first time. Rose had never seen the Valdez girl at all. Yet now one recognized the other as swiftly as she herself was placed.

Carmencita looked very tiny, high up on the back of a tall black horse, and very lovely in a gay pink riding suit with her curling hair wind-blown about her face and her cheeks flushed and her big eyes liquidly bright.

The two girls studied each other with all the frankness of two children. Both were young enough to permit the expressions upon their lips and in their eyes to be very thinly veiled; it had been inculcated in them from long ago to look down upon each other sneeringly from superior heights. That sort of thing had started in the Valdez home where dainty little Señorita Carmencita at five or six had been instructed in the obligations of her own haughty lineage; once upon a time there had been a royal ancestress! Her own blood was as blue as blue. Like that sky up yonder; *mira, Señorita!* Common folk like a gambler, like a gambler's daughter worst of all, were like the dirt beneath a clean Valdez shoe. And Black Jack Devlin, adoring his own chick of a child, had lost no time in leading her to understand that those greasy half-breeds down in Paradise Valley —perhaps with negro and bad Portuguese and Indian blood in them—were never to be permitted to set foot across a decent Devlin threshold.

So now Rose-alba and Carmencita, if they didn't exactly

snarl at each other did at least show their pretty white teeth—in smiles!

"Oh!" said the little Carmencita, and her hand flew dramatically to her breast. "You—you are Rosy Devlin!"

"I am Rose-alba Devlin; some of my best friends call me Rosalie," said Rose Devlin. She struck her own pose, tossing back her glorious mane of hair; knowing that she was at a disadvantage in having to look up, purely in the physical sense, to the girl on horseback, she sweetened her smile and said in a voice that dripped saccharinely, "And you? I know! You are Chita Valdez!"

Chita! Uf! There was a Chita in the Valdez kitchen—a Chita, parenthetically, who wondered rather hopelessly when next she was going to be paid her honest wage. *Chita! Valgame!*

Carmencita could laugh like one running scales, like going up and downstairs.

"I am *Miss* Valdez of the Paradise Rancho," she explained, "and my name is Carmencita Valdez."

So they were Rose-alba and Carmencita. And both, behind their gossamery screens, were terribly thrilled and as throbbing with curiosity as was Eve on the First Day.

And so she was "Miss" Valdez— And Rose Devlin, all too late, wished she had availed herself likewise of that ice-clad "Miss." Too late now; not too late, however, to overlay her smile with an extra coat of ice. She said with excruciating sweetness,

"It is so nice that at last you have found time to come to see us—if you are really calling at the Mountain House? The only thing is, I am sorry that—"

She was going to say how regretful it was that Carmencita had chosen the wrong day, that there would be no one at home, that she herself, as Miss Valdez could see, was on her way somewhere else. But the urgent Carmencita said all in a rush, cutting across Rose's words,

"Oh, no! I was just passing by."

Now Carmencita Valdez had never ridden this way before and unless she turned back here there were only two places the trail could lead her; one was the Mountain House, the other was Secret Valley. Rose Devlin was given

fresh fuel for the fires of her curiosity. What in the world, she wondered, did the Valdez girl want in Secret Valley?

Ross Haveril? Of course. Who else, what else? She took fresh stock of Carmencita's chic loveliness. She thought, "Maybe she saw him when he went through Paradise Valley on his way to Liberty. She isn't wasting much time!" She put a good deal of all that into her smile as she said softly,

"Ross Haveril rode by here a little while ago. If you hurried you might even overtake him before he got back to Secret Valley."

Instead of answering, Carmencita glanced back the way she had just come and called sharply, "Romero! *Venga!* Come here, Romero!"

Old Romero on a fat and lazy pony came into sight; when he saw who it was that his little mistress was conversing with he looked scandalized. Also he looked frightened; he'd get the skin taken off his back if Don Francisco found out!

"Ride ahead, Romero," Carmencita commanded. "Show me the way and I will follow you." Romero, grabbing at his hat, was all eagerness to lead her away from his place and spurred past the two girls. Carmencita said a stiff "good-bye" to Rose Devlin and trotted off in Romero's wake. And Rose, having frowned after the departing riders who soon vanished among the pines, again climbed to the top of Faraway Rock. She thought, "She is pretty; they never told me she was as pretty as she is. She is as pretty as I am—maybe prettier." And then she thought, remembering a look she had first of all surprised in Carmencita's big, expressive eyes, "She isn't just taking a ride. She is going somewhere and in a hurry; her horse was wet with sweat. And, until she began showing off before me, she was worried—or excited— Scared! That's what she was! And going to see Ross Haveril! Now that's funny—"

She saw the freight wagons moving slowly on but no longer watched them. Her steady gaze had to do now with the upper end of the valley, with the open acres about the old gray house and straggling out-buildings and corrals, and with the far edge of the wood where presently Carmencita Valdez should reappear if she really were going to

a meeting with the newly returned Haveril. She knew she would have to wait a long while, an hour at least and maybe two hours, but had no thought of quitting her post until curiosity was satisfied— But before many minutes had dragged by she realized that "satisfied" was the wrong word. If she came to assure herself that Carmencita Valdez had made this long ride on unaccustomed trails to a rendezvous with Ross Haveril, she would be faced by another question, a large and unanswerable, "Why?"

Then after a while, far down in the valley, she saw in the bright sunlight the tall black horse carrying the slim figure in the gay pink riding suit. Carmencita, riding out of the pines which down there looked like a dense black jungle, stopped and presently her escort, old Romero, whom evidently she had commanded to ride behind her once that she was again sure of the trail, came to her side. When Romero rode on at a gallop toward the ranch house, Carmencita withdrew until again she was hidden by the wall of the forest.

Ross Haveril happened to be at the house and alone. When a knock came at his door he sang out, "Come ahead." Old Romero, his hat twirling in his hands, his face screwed up unhappily, opened the door and stood on the threshold.

"Señor," he said, mumbling his words which seemed to be forced from unwilling lips, "there is someone who has come to talk to you."

"Well?" demanded Haveril, puzzled by the man's look and by the words that he had all but gagged over. "Bring him along. What's he hanging back for? Who is he anyhow?"

"It's someone," muttered Romero, "who waits back yonder under the trees. You are to go there with me. It— The matter is important."

"Who the devil are you?" said Haveril.

"Me, I am Romero, Señor. From the Hacienda Paraiso."

Ross Haveril thought that he understood then. It would be that little crowing rooster Valdez, a treasonous little devil, no matter what his errand.

"Let him come along here if he wants to see me," he said curtly.

"But, Señor—"

"Dammit, man, can't you see I'm busy?"

He was busy. His stubble of beard had begun to irk him; with one side of his face still lathered and the other scraped clean, he turned back to his cracked mirror.

Romero got through a second, "But, Señor—" when Haveril blasted him with curses, just having nicked his chin. Then Romero, backing up, whispered hurriedly, "Señor, it is—it is the Señorita Valdez. She must not be seen here. And there is something—I don't know what, but something that she swears is like life and death itself! For the love of God, Señor!"

So Ross Haveril finished shaving and went out to the barn for a horse and thereafter galloped in Romero's wake across the fields to the edge of the forest. He whistled softly when he saw the picture the girl made in her pink outfit; then, when he rode to her, he began to laugh. And she began to bite her lips and turn scarlet—and to blaze at him with her eyes as he had fired at old Romero with his swear words.

"Oh! You make me so angry!" she flamed out at him, looking a small rampaging fury.

He didn't even say, "But I haven't done anything! I haven't even said a word!" but just chuckled.

"You— You! I know what you are thinking! You have no right! Don't you dare!"

His chuckle which had been but laughter ebbing away swelled into fresh laughter.

"Oh!" she burst out the second time, and her hand grew into a small clenched fist, pounding at the horn of her saddle. "I could kill you!"

"And so, Carmencita *mia*, you came all the way over here to see me? Are you going to shoot me, or use a knife or—"

"Will you never be serious? Not even for one little minute? Not at a time like this?"

"Like this? Like what?"

Romero had stopped at what he no doubt held to be a discreet distance, yet it was not far enough to suit her. She saw that he had his old head tipped aside so as to bring his good ear toward them, and she gave him a look and a gesture which caused him to withdraw another score of paces.

"Señor Haveril," said Carmencita then, holding herself

very stiff, her chin elevated, her voice as cool and aloof as she could make it, "you can be very sure that I should not have come to see you unless I felt myself compelled to do so. I want you to understand that."

He saw that she was deeply in earnest about something, almost tragically so, yet she did not yet sober him to the extent of causing him to stop the words which were already all but spoken. He gave them voice in mock sobriety, touching them off with a sigh.

"And so you did not really come back to be kissed again?"

"That is not very funny," said Carmencita, and sniffed her disdain. Then she shrugged; one must ignore a ruffian's lack of any sense of refinement, that was a birthright of *la gente*. Still she caught herself thinking, as she looked so haughtily back at him, "I did not know his face was so fine and lean and— Why, his mouth is even sensitive! And generous and strong, too. Now that he has shaved himself he is handsome—or anyhow he would be as handsome as anything—if he wasn't just a big, ugly brute!" So much for a confidential aside to Carmencita. To him she said, "I have come because it was my duty. It is because I am a human being, not a savage—"

"Now you take a real, unspoiled savage, why he's the most human—"

"Señor! I did not come for foolishness, I tell you! You are going to listen and I am going to tell you— *Señor! No matter what happens, you must not come to Paradise Valley!*"

"Why should I want to come—as long as you come here!"

"I am not going to come again, ever! And you know it. But you must do what I say. You will not come to our valley." Thus far she had commanded; suddenly she was begging. "Promise me. Promise me that one little thing, Señor Ross Haveril! That no power on earth can make you come!"

"Now, I don't get this," said Haveril, and grew as serious as she was. "What's happened? What are you afraid of? Why shouldn't I go wherever I damned well please?"

"I can't tell you everything! I can just tell you that you must not come to Paradise Valley. I can just warn you—"

"Warn?" he caught her up. "That means I can look out for trouble if I set foot in your valley?"

"Mr. Roberts—Bob Roberts the man from the mines who was your friend—he is dead now, no, Señor? Do you want to be like that?" She was as tense as a reed shivering in a wind; her voice was an urgent, frightened whisper. "They—" She blurted it out. "They are going to kill you! If you come to Paradise Valley it will be because you are invited there—and someone will kill you there. Now I have told you."

She plucked her reins taut at that and swung her horse about to be off in headlong flight. But he had read her purpose in her eyes and in the timbre of her voice, and shot his hand out, catching her horse's bit and yanking it to a standstill and so close to his that his knee and hers brushed.

"We'll have the rest of this," he told her. "Who is going to invite me? Your uncle, of course. And who is going to have a try at popping a bullet or a knife into me? The same Don Francisco de Valdez y Verdugo?"

"No, no, no! Maybe, yes, he will invite you, for you are neighbors and you have just come back and it would be courteous for him to ask you to have dinner sometime. But it is not he who—he is not the one—"

"You are going to tell me all about it," said Haveril. "How you happen to know, or whether you are just imagining things—and who it is that you think is out for my scalp—and why the devil Valdez is the one to invite me to drop in and be butchered. Let's have it."

"You must not ask me; I could never tell you. But I know! And I am frightened and I have come to tell you." All the stiffness went out of her and she began to sag in the saddle; she looked very weary and very sad and hopeless. "And you must not tell anyone in the world that I came and said these things to you."

Reluctantly he withdrew his hand from her horse's bit.

"I get part of it. That uncle of yours is a scoundrel but not a murderer; just a petty scoundrel. Somebody's tool, maybe? Well, Tom Storm's, for a bet! Why not?" He shrugged. "Time will tell as usual, being a blab-mouth

sooner or later. Well, I have you to thank, Carmencita; you're quite a girl."

"And I have your promise then?" she asked gently. "You will keep away from our rancho? No matter what, you will stay away?"

At first she had only the glint in his eyes for answer. Then he said easily,

"What do *you* think?"

CHAPTER XVI

SECRET VALLEY came up out of its Rip Van Winkle sleep and all of a sudden was as lively as a hatful of crickets. A crew of men brought up from Liberty, carpenters and masons, went to work on the old house making it not only livable but downright comfortable, a pleasant place to dwell in. An ugly old Chinese cook whom they called Heart's Ease and who looked like the devil and cooked like an angel, installed himself in the kitchen with something like forty assorted butcher knives, and made the mountain air fragrant in a new way with the aromas floating out of his always wide opened windows.

Ross Haveril and Luke Oliver were partners in this way: Ross gave Luke the money to pay off the mortgage that Tom Storm held, and Luke went alone one morning to Lost Valley and had his few gleeful moments shoving the money over to Storm and killing the lien. So Ross bought back the old Haveril home, and Luke was not sorry; and with the surplus of funds that came into Luke's hands he chipped in with his partner to restock the ranch. And Luke became again what he had been those many years ago, foreman of Secret Valley. He sighed a deep sigh of relief.

"Me, Kid, I like it a heap better this way," he said. "I wouldn't ever have took the place off your dad in the first place, only he was dead when he gave it to me and you were off gallivanting. Now, long's I live, I'm going to run things here, and if you don't like my ways I'll boot you over the mountain, and when I'm dead, all my share goes back to you."

He made Ross laugh. "You, dead! Why, you old heller, you're so tough you'll never die."

"Hope so," said Luke. "It's kind of fun living, ain't it, Kid? Nowadays, I mean."

The workmen finished their house revamping; the fences got straightened up and a new corral came into being; Ross, loafing one twilight through the old apple orchard, sent for new trees to be planted; Luke rode fifty miles to Big Buffalo and bought up a herd of young stock, driving a hard and victorious bargain with a stockman who he knew needed cash money more than wild beef on the hoof, arranging for delivery of the stock within thirty days.

In this way the days drifted by and Ross Haveril, with both hands full of endeavor here at the ranch, let extraneous matters alone, taking cognizance of them only on the outer fringe of his thoughts. True, he did not forget Bob Roberts, and consequently he at times meditated on Bull Strake and Storm's more than likely connection with the affair—and on Carmencita's flying visit and earnest warning. But for once in his life he did not hurry into things which, as he saw them, would keep. Neither Bull Strake nor Tom Storm was going to jump fences getting out of the country; and there had as yet come no messenger from the Valdez rancho inviting him to enact the roll of Dilly, Dilly, come-and-be-killed.

"I can't get it," he said once to Luke in his latter connection. "First, I don't know why that little Spanish rooster has got it in for me—"

"You took his hundred dollars," Luke reminded him, "when he thought you were flat busted; and then he found out you had more money than he had. I'll bet a man he didn't die laughing over that."

"But he wouldn't want to slit a man's gullet for that sort of monkey business. And, even if he did, why want to do the act on his own land where folks would be figuring it was his job of work? Likely, that little devil Carmencita made the story up."

"No," said Luke. "Don't you fool yourself. That girl isn't the sort to run around playing jokes; you can tell with one good look at her that she takes life in mighty serious fashion." He regarded Haveril studiously over the

rims of his crookedly adjusted spectacles. "What about your new love life, Kid, with those two crazy youngsters, the Señorita and Black Jack's girl, slithering into it? Look out or if one of 'em don't get your scalp, the other will. They know by now you got money in your pants pocket."

Ross grinned at him. "How about a little run-in on Black Jack again? We sort of owe him money, Luke, and we haven't dropped in for quite a spell."

"No more of the Mountain House if you've got half the sense the good Lord gave geese," said Luke. "How you got away with what you did the other time, I don't know. Black Jack and his house are as crooked as a dog's hind leg that's been kicked by a mule."

"He's got his revenge coming, if he wants it," said Ross, and Luke, looking disgusted, said, "Rats."

"You might be right for once in your life," Ross conceded, not caring one way or the other. And with other matters on his mind he would not have thought about the Mountain House so soon had it not been that the very next day a man, loose in the saddle and insolent and quite graceful in the way of here-we-go youth, rode down into the valley with a message from Black Jack Devlin. The word was that the gambler was again in funds; he'd be glad any time to give Haveril a run for his money.

And so that night, groomed and immaculate in his new silk shirt and boots and wide black hat that he wore somehow like a pirate, Ross Haveril showed up again at Black Jack's. Luke said, "No thanks, not me," and stayed behind.

He found the set-up here much as he had on his former visit, save that Tom Storm wasn't here and Bob Roberts was missing, and there were fewer men. But Black Jack Devlin was on deck, sleekly handsome as before, and so was Rose-alba, back at the faro layout; Hannigan dispensed fiery liquor and sad-eyed Jimmy Weaver tinkled the piano sentimentally and Doc tempted to come over to the roulette table.

Rose Devlin's eyes clung curiously to Haveril's, and for the moment he allowed himself to be drowned in their depths which were shadowy with mystery. She didn't smile, nor did he; they just looked at each other. But almost immediately his attention was drawn elsewhere.

At a small round poker table a man sat alone, bottle and glass before him and a tidy stack of gold pieces which he kept clinking. He was a vast sort of man; he loomed as big as a mountain, and he was as surly a brute as Ross remembered ever having seen, and he was obviously drinking deep. He was Grove Jordan, a ruddy monster with a quarter inch growth of red beard; he was a cousin of Bull Strake's and a hard man to get along with. He was of that type that you'd say hated itself, and with reason.

His glowering, embittered eyes came up from brooding on the table before him and glinted into Ross Haveril's.

"You!" he said, and toppled over his golden stack. "Gambler, are you? Well, I'll take you on, flipping a coin, heads or tails, twenty dollars to the shot."

For a second only Ross was of two minds. Then he stepped promptly over to Grove Jordan's table.

"Shoot the coin," he said. "I'll call it while it's in the air."

The red giant shot a coin aloft from a horny thumb nail.

"Tails it is!" said Ross while the gay golden disc was still on its upward flight.

It came down on the table and lay flat, and Grove Jordan gave it the briefest glaring glance, then scooped it up and threw it at Haveril.

"Take it," he muttered, and his voice sounded thick. "I'll get you the next time."

"Hey, there," Ross said sharply, and slammed the coin back on the table. "I called it tails."

"Tails it was!"

"It was heads. It's your win."

"Why, damn you! It was tails and nothing else."

"You grabbed it too quick. I saw it. It's not mine, I tell you. It was heads."

"You're a damned liar!" bellowed Grove, and put both hands on the table, surging up erect.

"Liar yourself," retorted Haveril.

Grove Jordan, leaning forward, doubled up a fist that looked the size of a boxing glove and struck first. Haveril, willing enough to meet the man, swayed lightly to one side, dodged the bow and delivered his own. It took Grove Jordan square on the chin and sent him crashing backward to the floor. And only then did Ross Haveril see what he had done.

He had bowled over a one legged man. With Jordan behind the table he had not realized that fact. The big man has lost his right leg, high up, and wore a clumsy wooden stump. Now that he lay sprawling on the floor, struggling awkwardly to get up, it was simple enough to see what ailed him both physically and otherwise; the loss of that leg was what had made him the embittered and brutish thing that he had grown to be.

Ross Haveril's face went as red as a beet. He opened his mouth to say, "Hell, man, I didn't know! Why didn't you tell me?" His impulse was to help the man up. But with a certain fine instinct he caught himself back from saying a word. He just stood there.

Grove Jordan had difficulty in getting up. At last he succeeded. He came back toward Ross.

"I won't fight you," said Ross. "We haven't any quarrel anyhow."

"You're a dirty coward. I'll jerk this stump of mine off and club you to death."

Haveril saw the fire in the fellow's eyes and knew how he felt. But he wouldn't give in entirely.

"All right," is what he said. "But we fight on even terms. Either I'll stand on one leg while we do it, or we'll sit in chairs or we'll lie on the floor. And then I'd like the job of beating the merry hell out of you."

By this time Hannigan was on the job, stepping softly, a hand behind his back and in that hand the persuader he had used more than once; and Black Jack, too, came forward, saying:

"Haveril is right, Grove. You two have no fight. You claim he won, he claims you did, that's all. Just a mistake."

"Mistake, hell!" roared Jordan. "He'll say next I've got only one leg and no eyes at all. I tell you it was tails! I saw it."

"It was heads," said Ross.

Rose Devlin was watching them. She said to herself, "Two men like them, fighting because each says the other won! Two men like them—they're both crazy!"

Grove Jordan came stumping on, close up to Ross Haveril, fury reddening his eyes.

"You're going to finish this or you're a yellow dog," he said.

Then all of a sudden Ross began to laugh. And, likewise all without warning, he began to like this lumbering, sore-headed giant. When he started laughing, other men began grinning; it was a queer sort of quarrel, as Black Jack had said, and now impressed the onlookers as downright funny, and they too started laughing and slapping their hats against their dusty thighs and stamping with their lopsided, dusty boots, some with spurs on them, so that the room was in a genial uproar. And Grove Jordan, looking bearish and stupid and sullen, like some angry Caliban, was the only man with an ugly face.

"Look here, Grove," chuckled Ross. "We just got off to a wrong start. How about a drink together, and to hell with the twenty."

Grove's hands seemed bursting out of the skin stretched over them, and a look of murder was stamped all over his face—and then a slow, wide grin spread his big mouth and showed his strong square teeth. He extended his hand.

"Put it there, Kid. We'll have the drink. Only it's on me—"

"Like hell it is!" snapped Ross.

"Damn you—" boomed Grove—and then they both began laughing together and went up to the bar, arms about shoulders—and Ross did not play at Black Jack's that night but took Grove Jordan along home with him to Secret Valley, making a new friend, spending half the night with him, cementing friendship.

And then came at last word from Don Francisco de Valdez y Verdugo. One of his cowhands came riding slouchingly and altogether competently over; he brought word of the fiesta and barbecue and inevitable dance to follow; and he made it clear that whereas everybody was invited, in particular did Don Francisco de Valdez y Verdugo look anxiously forward to the pleasure of Señor Haveril's presence.

"He ought to have a few more names, that Valdez," mused Haveril aloud, looking quite serious. "Such as José de Caramba y Que Tal y Talvez-Mañana Simpatica y Que Mas."

The messenger, a swart Mexican, cocked his hat and used his spurs and was off like a shot. And Ross Haveril stood with his thumbs in the armholes of his vest—he wasn't wearing a coat—and laughed at him—and so did the two men hunkering on the porch, Luke Oliver and the newly welcomed Grove Jordan.

A day of fiesta at the Hacienda in Paradise Valley was a day trimmed all around the edges with pleasing extravagances. Indians squatted over the barbecue pits, turning their faces this way and that against the red heat of the coals, turning also long willow poles on which thick chunks of juicy young beef were cooking and filling the air a mile away with an invitation to come and eat. Under the trees by the creek were long tables with benches just as long, and there were tortillas and huge bowls of chile con carne and frijoles-the-way-you-liked-them, just hot enough to burn your tongue and yet not quite sear it for all time; and there were ollas of red wine, very red wine and very winey, as strong as a strong man's friendly handclasp; and there were cobs of corn and astonishing messes with young string beans and squash and onions, and you never saw so many tomatoes and calabashes. But all this was a mere nothing, because there were other things to come first and also to follow after.

There were young people there, which is to say very young people, boys and girls who loved to chase after the greased pig and to shin up the greased pole, pretty nearly always to fail, but amidst shrieks of laughter; and there were boys and girls, a bit older, tremendously eager to fall in love; and there were, above everything else, horse races. The open road in front of the house was the track. Any man who thought he had a fast horse was free to ride. There were a dozen riders, each willing to bet his shirt on his mount. Tom Storm, making himself important and prominent as was his way, was a sort of master of ceremonies. It was he who lined the contestants up, dictated the course which was up the road a mile, then back; he who fired the pistol shot to set them off.

Ross Haveril, a man who loved a good horse, picked the winner with his eye before the horses trotted out into the road. He fancied a certain big, gallant, golden-yellow sorrel stallion. And he did not know until the race was over and

that horse won by six or eight lengths, that it was Tom Storm's horse, Destruction. Haveril's eyes were alight with the joy of a rich appreciation when he saw Destruction come bursting home.

Then someone told him.

"It's Storm's horse, Destruction. He's a great horse, but he's a man killer."

The horse, thought Ross, that was supposed to have killed Willard Hale.

He went down to the creek, a place of green shadowiness, for a long cool drink. And that was the first time that he knew Rose Devlin was here.

She looked at him queerly. He knew that she had seen him come down this way and that she had followed him. She opened her lips to speak but didn't say anything; she just stood there and looked at him, and to save his life he could make nothing of that look of hers.

In the long silence which lay heavily upon them he started asking himself questions. He thought. "The first night I got here I told Bob that I was already deep in love with his girl, this Devlin deviless. Then I saw Carmencita and, so help me, I did for a minute think I loved her! Must be I've gone clean crazy since the last time I fell on my head. This girl—this girl Rose Devlin—"

"Mr. Haveril," she said, and seemed to speak with difficulty.

"The name is Ross," he said and smiled at her, getting himself in hand. "Hello, Rose."

"Ross, then," she said. "I don't know why I am saying this to you. I don't like you. Maybe I hate you; I guess I do. Anyhow you're a square shooter."

He took off his hat to her.

Her fair face darkened. He was by way of having the light touch on life at a moment when there was no levity within her, just a hard bearing down, a bleak misery.

She was dressed for outdoors; since that was the first time she had ever set foot at the Valdez Hacienda, since she never intended to come here again, she had taken pains to frame her piquant loveliness in a costume which would be marked and remembered; in olive-green riding togs with a wide red belt, with high black boots, very shapely and

fitting like gloves, with a broad hat with a feather in it and red silk blouse that could have come only from Mexico, she accomplished her purpose. But somehow Ross Haveril had more to do with her eyes, with her vagrant curls and the mould of her red mouth than with her artificial outward embellishments.

He waited for her to go on. He had not thought that she would seek him out; not that she would say to him, "Ross, anyhow you're a square shooter," that she could conceivably have any word for him.

So when he said, "Hello, Rose," there was nothing more to say.

She looked over her shoulder to make sure that they were alone, and alone they were save for the rushing water in the creek at their feet and overhead the thick greenery of willows and alders and slim young aspens.

"You came back to our mountains, I don't know why," she said. As already a shadow had drifted over her face, so now did a deeper darkness, a wet dark, come into her eyes. "Some crazy whim, I suppose. If you hadn't come back—"

"I know. If I hadn't come back Bob would be alive now. And you wouldn't know yourself for what you are."

"Never mind that! Never mind all that! I came to tell you— You have money, a lot of money, more money than most of us know anything about. All right; shove it into your pocket and—and go! Leave this country right away, just as fast as you can. And—"

"Rose," said Ross Haveril. "Rosalie. Rose-alba, because I like Rose-alba best of all. Tell me. What's this all about?"

"I don't like you," said the girl. "Maybe I hate you. But somehow— Oh, I don't know! But I do know this: If you stay here they—they— Oh, some of them are going to kill you! Do you understand?"

"Understand? Why, you could slap me down with that little fan that's hanging from your wrist! What are you talking about?"

It was just then, of all times, that he glimpsed Carmencita's small dark face in which her liquid eyes were so large, with light and shadow across her cheek as she stopped short in the little crooked path through the trees.

Carmencita acted queerly: She started to dart forward,

she took in the picture which Ross Haveril and Rose Devlin made, she leaped to a lot of temperamental conclusions—and caught up her fluffy white skirts and ran, her blue ribbons fluttering.

Ross Haveril, with the memory of her scurrying flight still in his eye, turned back to the Devlin girl.

"Tell it to me in words a man can understand," he said. "What is this all about? They are going to kill me; that's nice. But who are *they?*"

"I can't tell you—"

"It's Bull Strake, isn't it? And maybe Tom Storm? And, just for a wild guess, your daddy kicking in? Black Jack wouldn't cry his eyes out, would he, if I should fall over a cliff?"

He saw the lift and heave of her breast, and he saw the dark passionate glimmer in her eyes. He said to himself, "Why, she's only a kid in her teens, a baby, and she's trying to carry on like a grown-up!" And he thought further that he had treated her roughly.

"So, Rose-alba," he said very gently, "I ought to thank you and I do thank you, and I won't ask you any more questions. I begin to get into my thick skull that I'm not wanted around here—not wanted alive. Now I'll tell you just this: I am staying. And if anything happens to me you'll know that you did all you could, warning me to high-tail somewhere else."

"Please!" she pleaded. "Oh, please!" and he saw bright tears in her eyes.

After that he would never be surer of anything than that it was Rose-alba's father who wanted him wiped out.

His brows came dragging down in a thick puzzled frown, for another thought shot across this one, that also Carmencita was warning him, that another likely thing was that her Uncle Valdez also wanted him extinguished. But, damn it all, he scarcely knew either of these two!

"Here's something," he said, and for the first time sounded stern. "You warn me, and I think I know why; you don't want your father to be rated a killer on top of other things. Now wait a shake! I have already been warned—not to come here to Paradise Valley. It seems I'm to be killed here, too, and that means Valdez, doesn't it? Valdez

and Storm and Bull Strake—and Black Jack Devlin, all in one pile? Only it doesn't make sense, does it?"

She said—and her voice sounded like a shrug of indifference— "I've done what I could. Suit yourself," and started back to the lively group around the tables where the oaks spread above like great green clouds.

But he stepped swiftly in front of her, blocking the way.

"Rose-alba! I am mystified!"

"I can't explain any further. It's dangerous here for you, that's all."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. It's you yourself who mystify me, who set me wondering, all mixed up. Do you think—and tell me honestly—do you really think that I am in love with you?"

Rose-alba sniffed and pretended scornful laughter.

"I saw the little Carmencita peeking through the trees," she said. And with that she slipped by him and returned to the crowd churning about the tables.

A dance platform of rough boards rudely planed, then snowed under with scrapings of candles for the sake of slickness, centered the grove, and there were three musicians already warming up, violin and guitar and banjo. Couples carrying sandwiches or pieces of cake or barbecued beef, were already jiggling their feet, getting ready to go. They would dance all afternoon and all night.

Ross Haveril saw Carmencita; she avoided him, pretending that he wasn't on earth. He stood leaning against a tree, making a thoughtful cigarette, looking folks over. Luke Oliver gave him a jerk of the head; Grove Jordan was at Luke's side, and not far away were Bull Strake and the two Bedloe boys and Jake Go-down. That gesture of Luke's was as good as a third warning that day.

Ross thought, "Little Don Rooster has sure let the gates down today, setting his haughty pride to one side and letting the riffraff in. It kind of looks as though Carmencita knows what she is talking about."

Luke came over to where Ross was standing and as he did so Ross saw Bull Strake step up to his cousin, Grove Jordan, and begin speaking to him quietly.

"Me, if I was you, Kid," said Luke, "I'd get out of this

mess. I don't like the smell of it. It sticks out a mile that Strake and the Bedloes and Jake Go-down are especially imported for your sake."

"They won't start anything at a place like this, with a crowd around. It would be a fool thing to do when they could drop in on us at the ranch any night."

"Men are always doing fool things."

"What I can't make out is just how Valdez figures in all this."

"He's in with Storm, one way and another; I've got the hunch that Storm owns him."

Later they saw Valdez; he was most cordial, fairly aflutter with affability, but down underneath he was patently as nervous as a cat; he looked as though he hadn't slept for nights, and his eyes were haunted by a shadow that might have been fear. Altogether a queer, strained atmosphere hung over the place, with Valdez like that, with little Carmencita frightened, with Rose Devlin in the mood which gripped her—and with Storm and Strake and Strake's men watchful and silent and ominous.

Still the young people danced and were quite gay and the tenseness of the hour was overlaid with laughter as the jars of strong red wine went around. Ross noticed that Rose Devlin did not dance; maybe it was because, with Bob Roberts so newly dead, she hadn't the heart for it. He saw Tom Storm try to persuade her, only to have the girl turn her back on him and move away. He noted, too, that Carmencita whose little feet one knew were made for dancing, did not go near the platform, though many men laid siege to her. Storm asked her, too; she did not treat him as boldly as Rose had done but shrank away, eluding him just as effectually. There was a scowl of rage on Storm's handsome face.

Grove Jordan rejoined Ross and Luke. He said to Ross, in that sour and sullen voice of his, "You saw me with Bull Strake. Bull's a cousin of mine but I hate his guts. He was trying to pump me; there are a lot of things he'd like to know about you. And he'd like to know, if it came to a ruckus between him and you, what side of the fence I'd be on."

"I'd sort of like to know, too," said Ross.

"Your side," grumbled Grove. "Hell can take Bull back as soon as it likes."

"Thanks, Grove," was all that Ross said.

As it grew dusky along the creek and under the oaks the Indians built up big bonfires and lighted the string of colored lanterns over the dance floor. Rose-alba shook hands with Valdez, ignored Carmencita, and left. Storm hurried after her and was obviously asking to see her home. She swung up into the saddle without answering him and rode away.

As quick as a flash Carmencita, making sure that both Valdez and Storm were occupied, came to Ross Haveril. She hardly stopped an instant, just slipping a folded sheet of notepaper into his hands, giving him an imploring and still frightened look, and hurrying on.

There was light enough to read the few words and he did so almost at a glance. Then he shoved the paper into his pocket.

He said to Luke,

"In half an hour I'm to cross the footbridge over the creek, not letting anyone see me; she'll go to the house, slip out the back way and meet me in the orchard."

Luke meditated, then spoke with a growl almost as good as Grove Jordan's.

"I guess it's a damn fool thing to do. So you'll be sure and do it."

"I think the kid's on the level," said Ross, "and I know she's scared to death. And there are a lot of things she can tell me; maybe she's going to now."

"Maybe so," said Luke, and made up his mind to cross the footbridge in Ross's wake.

CHAPTER XVII

IN HALF an hour it was quite dark in the old orchard with only the faint twinkling of the first few stars to shine on the still leaves. Where there was a big apple tree casting the deepest pool of dark Ross was sure he would find her. Her face was only a wan blur in the dark but he could see, or thought he could, the glimmer of her Spanish

eyes. She exclaimed hotly,

"I told you not to come, and now you see you came anyhow—and the others are all here waiting for you, Tom Storm and that terrible Bull and his friends."

Her voice was trembling and he could make out that her body was shaking so that she seemed to shiver as though cold.

Cold she was, with dread. She had done her best to mask her terror when there were other eyes watching her; now she made no pretense.

"Don't you think it might pay," he asked quietly, "if you told me—"

"But that is why I sent for you! Listen! I am going to tell you everything. I cannot do anything else. And maybe it will help save your life—and maybe it will help save mine, too! Ooh, I am scared!—I am going to run away!"

"Run away? What's the matter? What on earth do you want to do that for?"

"Can't you understand anything?" she said passionately. "Haven't I told you I am e-scared! Do you think I like to be scared so I nearly drop dead every five minutes? Look at me! In two days I have turned into an old woman!"

He didn't even smile at that but merely said, "Let's have it. And better talk fast and stick to the point if you don't want it suspected we are together."

So, as she had promised, she told him everything she had overheard that night when she stood under Tom Storm's window, and gave her account surprisingly coherently. At the end Ross whistled softly.

He knew now what the hold was that Storm had on Valdez, an embezzler from his own niece. He knew now what he had already felt so sure of, that Storm had killed Willard Hale long ago, that Valdez knew—and that it was Storm who had shot Bob Roberts.

"But," said Ross, "they don't know you overheard all this—"

"They do know! They have known two or three days now. When I ran I dropped my scarf; I never thought of it again. Tom Storm found it; then he hunted for tracks; he found a girl's tracks under his window! I could tell when he looked at me that he knew. Then he went and told Señor

Valdez. And he stormed at me and threatened me, and now they watch me all the time like a big cat watches a little bird."

By now her teeth were chattering. Ross started to say something but she ran on hurriedly.

"And I know what they are going to do! Señor Valdez knows that if I go and tell that he stole my *papagrande's* money, they will lock him up in a jail. And Tom Storm knows that if Señor Valdez gets locked up, then he'll tell all he knows about Tom Storm. So there are two things they don't wish to happen. So they will make me marry Tom Storm first, and after that I'll die quick, you'll see, because they would give me poison or something. Because what this wicked Storm wants is to marry that Devlin girl!"

"But then why wouldn't he want to marry Rose-alba now, instead of you?"

"Oh, I don't know! He is full of schemes and tricks. He has always wanted to own Paradise Valley—and maybe it's for some other hold on Señor Valdez. What does it matter why?"

"I've got to see you again," said Ross. "If you've got all this right you'll know at least that you are quite safe for a while—until after you marry him anyhow. And I don't see how they can force you."

"I must run back now or they will miss me. If you escape tonight without being killed I will try if I can to slip away soon and come again to your ranch. Or I will send Romero with a message. And I count you my friend, Señor, because I have been a friend to you. And now you go, too, and quickly. *Y vaya con Dios.*"

With that she sped away and he could hear the light patter of her running feet as she returned to the house from the rear.

Walking slowly, plunged deep into thought, he started back along the creek's edge toward the footbridge.

Luke Oliver stepped out of the thicker dark of a willow copse and swung into step with him.

"Learn anything, Kid?"

"Plenty, Luke. I'll tell you later. If Carmencita isn't plain crazy—"

"Nope, she's not crazy. She is sort of level headed in spite

of all her flutter. If she told you anything definite—"

"She did. We'd better watch our step tonight, Luke."

"Me, I'm doing such," grunted Luke. "You do likewise for once."

There was someone standing on the bridge when they approached it; when he saw them he came ahead to meet them and they could tell from tread-and-thump that it was Grove Jordan.

"Tom Storm's gone," he reported. "Left a little while ago, riding like a man in a big hurry. I don't know where Bull and the Bedloes and Jake Go-down are; they're not in sight anyhow."

"We're on our way, too," said Ross. "If they want to start anything I guess they'll know where to find us."

"With Storm gone," observed Luke, "there are only four of them, and there are three of us now. So if they cut loose you can be mighty sure it will be from under cover and where it's good and dark."

They went, the three abreast, to their horses tied at the long hitching rail at the edge of the picnic grounds and trotted unmolested out into the Liberty road. Luke spoke up then to make his suggestion.

"Me, I don't hanker for getting ambushed. Suppose we turn south a spell, cut across Green Meadows and hit the Old South Trail. Even if it's a mite longer it will bring us back to the ranch almost as quick, and we're in no hurry anyhow—and that way, if Bull Strake and his merry men are laying for us, they'll certainly get a good long wait all for nothing."

Ross chuckled. "It would be a joke on Bull and his bunch at that," he agreed.

So they turned right here instead of left, rode out of their way a couple of miles along Liberty road and then swung into Green Meadows.

Green Meadows was a low-lying land, swampy in places, damp everywhere, deep in rich grass on which their horses, at full gallop now, made scarcely a sound. There was a winding creek, broad and shallow, fringed with lusty willows; for the greater part of meadowland lay open and treeless under the stars, dotted here and there sparingly by occasional small groves. Were it not for these few groves

the eye could run from rim to rim of the meadows, a good three miles of flat fertility. Keeping to the drier spots they made good time.

As they curved about one of the aspen thickets Grove Jordan, on the outside, jerked up his arm, pointing.

"There they go!" was what he said.

For ahead of them, riding in the same direction they were taking, were four men. They too were like shadow-shapes drifting silently across the meadow, but just as they were glimpsed a sound floated back from them as one of the advance riders burst out singing.

"Whenever Bull's drunk, like most of the time," grunted Grove, "and especial if he's got some devilment up his sleeve, he even sings like a bull."

"We can pull up here and turn back," said Luke. "They haven't seen us yet—"

"No!" said Ross and sounded downright gleeful. "They haven't seen us and they haven't heard us—and they won't until we're slam-bang on top of them! Come ahead!"

So they shook out their reins and gave their horses the spurs and steadily overhauled the four drifting figures ahead of them.

With any luck, Ross felt sure this was going to be Bull Strake's surprise party in reverse.

And he was right.

He and Luke and Grove had their guns out before they rode within pistol distance, and kept up their headlong pace—and still the four in front were all unconscious of pursuit. Save for the faint thud of hoofs muffled in deep grass and damp soil there was no sound save Bull Strake's raucous bellowings in a song not meant for fastidious ears. Then when there came another sound it was Ross Haveril's voice, flat and toneless and somehow deadly, calling out,

"Get your hands up in the air without turning around, or we crack down on you." He sent a bullet whistling over Bull's head. "Get 'em up, Bull!"

Instantly eight hands went up; the horses kept on at their steady gait and swiftly Ross and Luke and Grove cut in front of them and brought them to a halt.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" roared Bull Strake.

Ross said to his friends, "While I shake them down, watch to see whether they bat an eye or wiggle an ear; if they do, let 'em have it."

Bull was choking with rage; all he could do was say over and over, "I'll get you for this, Ross Haveril—I'll get you for this—"

Ross, keenly watchful yet highly amused, made short work of collecting their guns, stuffing them one by one into his belt or a pocket or inside his shirt. And before he concluded this pleasant task he noted something peculiar; the starlight glinted on some metallic something that each man had tied to his saddle strings, and looking closer he made out that the four objects were gallon coal-oil cans.

"What have you got in those cans?" he asked.

"You go plumb to hell," growled Bull Strake.

"Booze most likely that you stole at Paradise Valley; couldn't you find anything but kerosene cans to put it in?"

Then he shrugged the matter out of his mind and rode over to join his friends.

"They look funny, don't they, boys?" he chuckled. And then his chuckle swelled into a deeper and richer and livelier mirth, and burst into one of those hearty laughs of his which made men join him if they were on his side of the joke, which made others weep with rage. Grove Jordan, who didn't laugh once a year, joined him and even Luke snickered. Then the three waved their hats and rode on ahead, with Bull Strake shouting after them in the grip of a perfect fury of rage. His bellowing voice kept up its refrain. "I'll get you for this! I'll get you for this!"

And Ross, rocking in the saddle in huge enjoyment, kept up his spontaneous laughter so that between the two of them they created such a duet as was never heard on land or sea.

"You might as well stir up a rattlesnake with a stick," said Grove.

"Where do you suppose they were headed for?" said Ross when Bull's voice was hushed and his own laughter wore itself away.

"Might be to our place," Luke answered, "seeing that the Old South Trail don't lead much of any place else."

"Wonder what they had in those coal-oil cans?"

"Might be coal-oil," said Luke very mildly. "Sometimes folks do put coal-oil in coal-oil cans like a man puts whisky in a whisky bottle or water in a canteen, or like folks put their heads in hats, or like you put your foot in trouble."

Ross Haveril was alone in the ranch house—Grove Jordan had elected to retire with Luke to the bunkhouse as the furnishings with which Ross had surrounded himself struck Grove as so luxurious and elegant as to make a man downright uncomfortable—when a few hours later the first of that night's visitors burst in upon him. It was late; he had put in two or three hours pondering matters, when he heard the rush and clatter of hoofs on the hard-packed yard. In two shakes Carmencita was in the room, a Carmencita again tricked out in that gay pink riding rig of hers, but herself looking not gay at all.

She ran to him and for an instant he thought she was going to throw herself into his arms.

"What on earth!"

"I told you what I would do. Yes, I am running away! I have already run this far, to you; you are going to help me, no? Oh, Señor, I am so sunk down in desperation and misery and—and I am more scared than I was before even!"

"You look it," he said bluntly, his eyes frankly troubled. Already he was wondering what the devil he was going to do with her—what any man could do with the like of her. He didn't put that thought into words but said instead, "And you look dog-tired and gaunt with hunger and—"

He dragged a big chair forward for her and eased her down into it.

"Now tell me. What has happened?"

"It is that terrible little old man—"

"Hold on! What little— You mean your uncle?"

"He is not my uncle any more!" said Carmencita with an angry flash of her eyes. "I'll bet anyhow that he is no true Valdez y Verdugo! Not my father's brother—I'll bet you! Maybe when he was a little baby, some orphan of low parents, he somehow got mixed up with my family by mistake! Oof!"

"Have it your way, but he's the one you mean?"

"Señor Valdez, yes. He—for the first time in his life he

laid his hands on me! He grabbed me—I could show you where my shoulders, both of them are black and blue, and they hurt." She rubbed one of them gently. "He jumped at me and grabbed me and my heart stopped and I thought he was going to choke me to death. I think he was, too!"

"Well, he didn't. But what was it all about?"

"Tom Storm went away early but before he left he went to the house and talked with Señor Valdez. And he said he had seen me look funny at you, and he had seen you look at me, too, and he told Señor Valdez he bet that I had told you all the things that I did tell you. And then he went away, and Señor Valdez couldn't find me—and at last he saw me coming in from the orchard, and somehow he knew that I had been with you! He *knew,* I tell you! Oh, he is smart, that terrible old man!"

"And what?"

"I was scared the way I tell you I have been scared all along, but I could see that he was scared, too! And he said a lot of things: He'd kill me if I ever looked at you or any other man until I was married, and he swore I'd be married right away, as soon as they could get a priest, and he was going to lock me in my room—and he did!"

"And I suppose you crawled out the window—"

"I changed my clothes quick and I put out my light and then I unlocked the door with my key that he didn't know about. And I sneaked out—and I came to you."

She said it as though that were the only logical thing to do. Perhaps it was.

He scratched his head, and asked,

"And what am I going to do with you?"

"You are going to save me. Haven't I tried to help you? *Bueno!* Like good friends we help each other."

"And now it's my turn?"

She nodded.

Ross walked up and down, a frown dragging at his brows, trying to figure what he was going to do. The girl might be just a flighty little fool, exaggerating things, twisting them out of shape, making them of whole cloth. On the other hand she might be in very grave danger and have sense enough to get out of it the fastest way.

Carmencita watched him, sank deep in her chair and re-

laxed. Already the color began to steal back into her cheeks and the haunting dread to withdraw from her eyes. Plainly she was putting all her troubles on him, shrugging them off her own shoulders.

He came to an abrupt halt.

"By now maybe Valdez has thought of something more to say to you, something to try to force out of you. If he finds out you have gone will he guess where?"

"Maybe. Because he knows I have told you everything, and that I am afraid of Storm and won't go that way, and that I wouldn't go to the Mountain House, and that I didn't have any money and wouldn't go all the way to Liberty where I don't know anybody. And he is smart, too, the way I told you."

"I've got to get you out of here, but where am I going to take you?"

"I don't know," said Carmencita simply.

"Oh, hell," said Ross under his breath, and Carmencita sighed. Perhaps she could understand that he had a right to say that.

"I'll go get Luke," said Ross. "I'll be gone only a few minutes; I'll take care of your horse, too. Suppose you run into the kitchen and make yourself a pot of coffee while I'm gone."

"I don't know how to make coffee," said Carmencita.

"Come ahead, I'll show you."

She followed him into the kitchen where he lighted a lamp, got a brisk fire going in the stove and set on coffee to boil.

"All you've got to do is watch it doesn't boil over or get too black."

"No. I am not going to stay in here all alone. I am going outside with you."

He took a deep breath, shoved the coffee pot to the back of the stove and went out through the back door, Carmencita keeping close at his heels. She kept close as he hurriedly stabled her horse and then as he strode away to Luke's bit of a house.

The light was out.

Luke and Grove were asleep. Ross threw open the door and called sharply,

"Hi, Luke! Snap out of it. You and Grove come over to the house. I've a notion the devil's to pay."

"What's up, Ross?"

"Get dressed and come over." And he added. "Carmencita Valdez is here. Maybe we're in for some more visitors."

He heard four bare heels thump on the floor. Then, from a distance he heard another sound, the drumming of running hoofs again. Carmencita, too, heard, and pressed closer to him.

Presently Ross saw a single rider, only a dark streak in the night, ride up to his porch and swing down and run up the steps. There was a quick, impatient rapping, then the door was flung open and his visitor vanished inside.

"You stay here, Carmencita," Ross told the girl who now had clutched his sleeve. "I'll go have a look at that hombre. You stay with Luke and do what he says."

"It is that terrible Señor Valdez, I could see," moaned Carmencita. "He has come to drag me back; he has come to kill me."

Ross freed himself and hurried back to the house. When he opened the door and looked inside, he came to a dead halt to stare incredulously. Confronting him, deathly pale and with eyes haunted by a look that made him see Carmencita's eyes again, was Rose Devlin.

CHAPTER XVIII

ROSE-ALBA brought word of fresh tragedy; Ross knew that as soon as he saw the tragic look in her eyes. For a moment she stood rigidly upright, her arms straight down at her sides and her hands clenched, her chin up but her lips quivering.

Then, overwrought in mind and soul and body, she crumpled up, melting down into the chair so recently vacated by Carmencita.

"Take your time," said Ross. "I've got some coffee on in the kitchen. A cup won't do you any harm."

In the kitchen he came upon his new acquisition, the Chinese cook they called at first Heart's Ease, now Buttercup, an ugly devil in a long-tailed nightgown and slap-

slapping slippers. Aroused from his slumber in his room at the rear, he kept blinking his mere slits of eyes.

"Wha' faw? Wallah mallah?" he demanded.

"Better get your clothes on, Buttercup," said Ross, and went to the stove. "We've got company and maybe are going to have more. And while you're at it you might as well dig out your old shotgun and see that it's loaded."

"Ooh-na-ma!" grunted Buttercup and went slap-slapping back to his room.

Ross brought in a cup of strong black coffee. The girl only stared at him.

"Black Jack is dead," she said. "So is good old Hannigan. I saw them both die. Oh God!"

Luke came hurrying in with Carmencita as close to his heels as she had been to Ross Haveril's and with Grove Jordan following. The two men had belted on their guns and both carried rifles. Seeing who this newest visitor was, Luke expelled a vast breath and the rasping words,

"For the love of Pete, Rose? What's the big idea anyhow? Is every girl in the country, dolling up in pink riding rig and green riding—"

"Shut up, Luke," said Ross. "There's been some sort of trouble over at the Mountain House. Black Jack has been wiped out and so has Hannigan, the barkeep. Rose is going to tell us. Come in and get the door shut."

The three came on into the room. Carmencita stared with round eyes at the girl in the chair; Rose-alba didn't seem to notice her or any of the others.

She was still seeing the horror of the thing she had witnessed tonight.

All the while Ross was holding the coffee cup. Again Rose refused it. He turned toward Carmencita; she shook her head vigorously, keeping her eyes fixed on the Devlin girl.

"Let's have it, Rose," said Luke.

She stiffened in her chair and lifted her chin; for a moment longer she kept her lips tightly compressed as though to steady them.

"Yes—Tom Storm followed me from Paradise Valley. He knew I knew he killed Bob. I knew he would, so I rode fast. I got home before he did. Black Jack and Hannigan were alone; I heard a few words. Bull Strake had told Black

Jack that Storm had shot Bob. I went to my room. After a while Tom Storm got there. He sounded mean and ugly; I didn't hear what he said but he was terribly angry. Maybe he said that Black Jack had told me about him and Bob. Black Jack was furious too. I never heard two men curse each other so. I didn't want to hear what they said; I was sick.

"And then Bull Strake came running in; he was looking for Tom and knew where he was. He brought Go-down and the Bedloes with him. He yelled so loud that I could hear about him having had trouble tonight with Ross Haveril and Luke. Everybody seemed to blame everybody else for everything from the time they killed Bob Roberts.—Oh, God!—I wanted to listen then. It was too late. I don't know who started the fight; maybe it was Bull; he sounded drunk. Somebody hit somebody. Then they started shooting. I think they were all shooting at once. Then it was all over.

"I went in then. Black Jack had—they shot him through the throat. I saw him flop— He is dead now. Black Jack is. So is dear old Hannigan. So is one of the Bedloes. I don't know which one; Bud, I think. Some of the others were hurt; I don't know how many.

"Tom Storm stood there looking at me. His eyes looked like a devil's. He is a devil. Damn him, oh, damn him! I ran back to my room.

He tried to get in but I had the door locked. I knew he would break it down.

"I got out the back way and ran to the stable. I rode bareback.

"I don't know what they said, Tom and Bull and Valdez and the rest. But I have got it in my head that they are coming over here. And—"

"Valdez?" demanded Ross. "You didn't say that he was there!"

"I forgot. Yes. But he came just after the fighting was over. I heard his voice. There were some other men outside on their horses. I guess they came with Valdez.

"You see, I had to come away. I am never going back. I came here. There was nowhere else. And I wanted to tell you."

A heavy silence flattened down in the room. Ross Haveril's eyes and Luke Oliver's locked toegther.

"If we can make it, Kid," said Luke, "we better get the hell out of here."

"No," said Ross. "I'm damned if I will. They're out to ruin us, to wreck the place. Bull Strake and his gallons of kerosene! All we've done here—barns and corrals and the house—ash heaps in the morning!"

Luke's hardening eyes trailed to the two girls.

"These girls—"

"Get them away while there's time, Luke. Off into the woods anywhere. Then they'd better keep moving. Neither of them is going to be safe around here another day."

Luke shook his head stubbornly.

"They're as young and healthy as I am," he said. And to the girls he said, "You two get out of here in a hurry. Get on your horses and ride like hell anywhere but where you came from. And keep going."

Carmencita screamed and began beating her hands together.

"You come with me! Some man come with me! I can't go alone!"

Some of the heaviness departed from Rose Devlin's eyes. She stood up.

"I can shoot as straight as any of you," she told them. "They killed Black Jack—Hannigan, too—"

Ross stepped to the door, jerked it open and looked out. He had heard something and now all heard it; the rush and rumble of hoofs beating like quick drums.

"Let's get all doors and windows fast, Luke," he said. "Not too much light in here either." He shouted to his Chinese cook, "Buttercup! Come here and bring your shotgun." But Buttercup was already coming in, dressed after a fashion, though still in his slippers, gun in hand and an enormous butcher knife stuck through his belt.

Even Carmencita was galvanized into useful activity. Fleetly she ran seeking doors to barricade. Rose-alba saw a couple of rifles on their pegs over the fireplace and took one down, its cartridge belt along with it. And above all

the racket they made they could hear clearer and louder the pounding of running hoofs.

"Hi, Luke!" called Ross. "They'll sneak up and burn us out and shoot us like damfool rabbits. Let's get outside and give them hell while they're still coming. Just the girls stay inside." He jerked his head toward Grove Jordan. "Come ahead, Grove. Here's your chance at Cousin Bull. Buttercup, you stay here with the girls."

The Chinaman didn't say anything and his facial expression never said anything; it was hardly an "expression" even. But when he watched Ross and Luke and Grove slip outside, darting through the door and down off the porch into the shadows, he slap-slapped after them. He gave the door a backward shove to slam it shut after him, but Rose Devlin threw it open again and was outside before the Chinaman was down off the porch.

Carmencita screamed, "Don't all run away and leave me all alone!" and then ran out to catch up with the others. Thus within about two minutes, their whole plan was changed and all of them were outside and down off the porch and ranged in the dark close to the western wall.

The hammering of hoofs drew their straining eyes toward the oncoming riders and presently, dark as the night was and black as was the wall of the pine belt beyond, they could make out vaguely a moving something which was the body of horses and riders.

Ross raised his rifle and despatched the first bullet into their midst. A yell came back with the echoed crack of the rifle.

A chuckle burst from a delighted Oriental.

"Good shot, Bossee! You ketchee one man."

Shot and shell were followed by utter silence.

"Stopped 'em, Kid," said Luke. "They figure they were too headlong. We might as well give 'em another."

"That was luck— Pretty dark, Luke.—A couple of shots more—"

He and Luke and Grove set free eight or ten bullets altogether. But they began to make out that their vague target had disintegrated; the riders scattered, drifting in various directions, so that they were more imagined than seen.

Then a voice called loudly.

"Haveril! Don't shoot! I come as a friend. All I want is my niece back. I know she is here. Let me have her and I give you my word to go in peace. And to take back all my men with me. It is the word of Valdez y Verdugo!"

"How many men will you pull off with you?" Ross called back.

A pair of hands gripped his arm convulsively.

"For the love of God, Ross, don't let him take me!"

"Sh, Carmencita!" he commanded. "Be still and listen!"

Valdez was answering.

"Eleven men, Señor. All the Paradise Valley hands I brought with me. I swear it!"

Ross grunted and muttered, to no one in particular, "He came as a friend—and so he brought eleven men with him!" Then, communing with Luke, "With a dozen men from Paradise, with Storm and Bull and one Bedloe and Godown, they've around sixteen or twenty men. Let's not waste ammunition, huh?"

To Valdez he made no answer. Carmencita gasped, "Then you are not going to give me to him?"

Her face, like a supplicating child's was uplifted toward his; again he saw the glimmer of stars in her eyes. He didn't say a word but still he reassured her. Obeying a heady impulse, he kissed her.

And again the Chinaman, standing close to them, chuckled.

"Good shot, Bossee!" he giggled.

"Shut up, you Chink. Sh! Let's hear him out!"

For Valdez was calling again. He repeated his words, no doubt thinking they had not been heard clearly or had not been sufficiently emphatically phrased. After that he pleaded; then, grown ugly, threatened. By this time Ross had estimated pretty closely just where little Don Rooster was located, and winged a bullet in his general direction. He drew no yell this time but there was a stream of Spanish invective.

After that there was silence again.

"They'll get down and scatter and try sneaking up on us Injun fashion," said Luke.

"We'll scatter, too," said Ross. Then, to Carmencita standing for protection so near that she could reach out and

touch him, and to Rose-alba near enough to have seen what had just happened, he said curtly, "You two girls get back under cover while you can. Into the house, both of you."

"I won't," said Rose-alba. "Into the house yourself."

"I can't!" cried Carmencita. "Oh, please, Ross! Not all alone by myself!"

Ross laughed; he couldn't help it. But he didn't just stand there laughing.

"Luke, suppose one of us gets to each corner of the house, or as near as he can where there's a likely shadow to squat in? Right?"

"Right as rain, Kid. Luck," said Luke, and stalked to the southwest corner; he had a notion that would be as lively a spot to hold as any.

"It's me to the corner nearest the barn," said Ross. "Grove, you and Buttercup take the other two corners."

Grove without a word, and Buttercup talking Chinese softly to himself as he slap-slapped away, vanished in the dark.

"Now you two little devils," said Ross. "What about you?"

"I am coming with you," said Carmencita hurriedly.

Rose-alba said:

"I'll stay right here. Why not?"

"No. Better come along with us, then around to the other side of the house. Between Grove and the Chink, if you like."

"I'd rather—"

"Dammit!" he growled at her. "You do what I tell you. —Oh, why in hell's name do you women folks have to be here anyhow?" Then he was sorry he had said that; both of them, after all, had brought warning, and both in some degree, no matter how small, had had his interest in mind. "Come ahead, Rose-alba, like a good kid. Please."

"Oh, all right," she answered, and went with him and Carmencita—and then quietly slipped to a place along the wall somewhere between Grove and the cook.

Then Ross said to Carmencita, "You stick right where you are for a minute; you can't come with me this time. I'm just making a quick dash to the barn to let the horses out." Before she could gasp out an objection he was off at a run.

He made his way, swift and unseen, to the barn and freed the four horses that were in their stalls, those he, Luke and Grove had ridden, and the one that had brought Carmencita from Paradise Valley. Then he ran to the coral, swung the gate wide and stampeded the several saddle horses there. As they snorted and sped through the gate with manes and tails flying, he thought regretfully, "It's a bad job, any way you look at it; it puts us on foot—but maybe it's saving the stock from getting burned to death or slaughtered with bullets." And then he started back to the house.

The raiders had drawn closer than he knew; some of them were already on the way to the barn. Bullets began singing in his ears and he had no way of knowing where they came from; he didn't see the flash of gunfire. He broke into a run, not worrying greatly about the chance of being hit but savage over the knowledge that it was going to be impossible for him to save the barn, foolhardy to try.

A gasp from Carmencita welcomed him back to his corner.

"I was afraid for you, Ross! Oh, so afraid!"

He began to think with Luke, "I suppose we should have tried to get out of here. They'll start their fires from the other side—"

Then he caught a glimpse of a dark figure scurrying toward the corral and sent a couple of shots after it.

There was no yell this time as the figure was blotted out in the dark.

A couple of shots came from Luke's corner; then Luke, like himself, held his fire. But from several directions a stream of bullets poured in toward the spots where he and Luke had revealed their locations. Both men promptly shifted ground. Ross commanding Carmencita to move farther along the wall, out of range.

As she started to do so one of the raiders who had circled the building at some considerable distance, began raking the wall too with his shots.

"Carmencita," he snapped at her, "you stand square behind me. Rose-alba! You get behind something if it's only Grove or the Chink."

Carmencita obeyed instantly. Rose called back quietly,

"You let me alone, Ross Haveril." And he heard the crack of her rifle.

Luke's voice startled him, speaking almost in his ear.

"Look, Kid. The way they're scattering they'll have a nice big circle all around us. They don't give a single damn what they knock over, girl, white man or chink. There's no chance of them forgetting to make a big torch out of the barn. Then they'll have a lot of fun nailing us."

"What's on your mind, old timer?"

"They're on foot. They've left their horses somewhere with a couple of men to hold them. We make a quick break that way; maybe they won't see us too soon; maybe they're sort of waiting for the firelight. We grab some horses for ourselves and scatter the rest; we leave 'em on foot—"

"Damn it—"

"No, we don't run away! Maybe we can get the girls off; the rest of us sort of wait for daylight, doing any pot-shooting we can meantime and using their fire if they ever get it going—"

"Come ahead! Tell Grove and the cook. We'll run like hell, headed east first, then swing around toward where the horses must be. Hold on! Wait a shake— Grove can't run with that leg!"

"He can stump pretty darn lively," said Luke, "and now's the time for him to stump his damnedest."

Ross stepped over in order to have a brief word with Grove Jordan.

"Sure," growled Grove. "Step along; me, I'm with you. If I can't keep up, that's my business."

So they made their start. Luke and the Chinaman stepped along side by side, with Carmencita behind them; Grove and Ross kept close together, with Rose-alba theoretically availing herself of what scant protection their thick bodies might afford. They moved swiftly, making as little sound as they could manage, though under his breath Grove cursed his wooden leg at every step, straight toward the single rifleman who, as far as they knew, was the only one as yet located on the eastern side of the clearing. It was their hope to be pretty well on top of him before he knew what was happening.

He saw them before they could glimpse him; startled, he

made the fatal mistake of letting out a shout before he squeezed the trigger. As he fired he was answered by five shots; the range was close enough for even the Chinaman's shotgun. There came no second shot from that quarter and that man never shouted again. And the six hurried on, straight over his sprawling body.

The Chink giggled.

"Me ketch 'um," he boasted, and patted his old shotgun affectionately.

This brief battle disclosed to the raiders where they were and the direction of their flight, and a volley of intermingled yells and bullets stormed after them. They could hear Tom Storm's unmistakable voice, though his words were lost in the bedlam and besides they were not attending upon words.

And just then another chorus of shouting voices crashed into all this confusion, whooping voices charged with a gloating mockery, and the first brilliant flames hissed skyward from the barn.

"Come on, come on," muttered Ross, dragging his eyes away from the quick bright banners of fire. "It's not much farther—a hundred yards more, and we're on the edge of the timber."

"Tom Storm's going to find out it's bad luck burning a man's barn," grumbled Luke. "Maybe he's forgetting he's got a barn of his own."

Before them they made out the dark wall of cliffs towering among the powdery stars, and the thicker black at the cliff's bottom was the edge of the wood where they might find some measure of protection—if they were not cut down before they got there. Ross urged the others to run ahead while he and Grove plugged along; Grove, making painful, sweaty work of it, cursed him uphill and down dale for his words and shook Ross's hand off his arm and swung about, jerking his rifle up and pouring a stream of lead back into the dark.

For again rifles were cracking and bullets were seeking them out.

There was the heavy thud of one of those bullets striking, and Grove Jordan balanced wildly and fell. Ross stooped

over him. Louder and angrier than ever did Grove's curses rise.

"Shot me in the leg, the — — —!"

Ross started to gather the man up in his arms, bulky as he was, for with one wooden leg and a wounded one—

"Leave me be!" roared Grove.

"But dammit, man, if you're hurt—"

"Hurt, your eyebrow. They shot me in the wrong leg!" And then, letting Ross help him up, he started laughing and Ross began laughing with him, and Luke, hunting through his profane vocabulary for the proper words to bestow upon the two of them, quite forgot the presence of the two girls.

Again they went on. They scarcely glanced over their shoulders; when they did so it was only to see the red fire leaping to loftier heights. Ahead of them the black wall rose higher, no solid, unbroken thing now but a rank of high-crested trees. The forest seemed to be holding its breath, waiting anxiously for them—stretching out its arms.

"No use being jackasses any longer," said Luke. "We're as good as burnt out anyhow; can't stop that. Here's a half-way chance to break and run for it."

"With us on foot, they'd run us down the first mile—" Ross began, but when Luke started saying, "If we get deep into the woods—" Ross went on, overriding his words—"unless we play a joke on them! Like this—"

Let the two girls go ahead, deeper into the forest lying under the cliffs, and let Grove and the Chinaman escort them. They'd get well under cover, then turn down toward the mouth of the trail that led out of the valley and up over East Ridge, and there they would stop and wait. Meantime Ross and Luke would take their chances together at playing that "joke" on the raiders.

Instantly Carmencita protested; she didn't feel at all secure under the protection of the ugliest Chinaman she or any of the rest of them had ever seen, or of the villainous looking one-legged man. Rose too was stubbornly lifting her voice when Ross, in a fine rage, swore that if the two didn't go along willingly Grove and Buttercup would drag

them along by the hair of their heads. The merry Buttercup chuckled gleefully and waved his big bright-bladed butcher knife.

"Better-so come like bossee say, or Ah Wong choppee with knife—choppee off allee hair—short!"

They obeyed then and in haste; almost instantly they vanished in the utter dark under the trees.

The last glimpse Ross and Luke had of them showed Rose-alba and Carmencita for the first time drawing close to each other.

"Burning nice, ain't it, Kid? Looks pretty, don't it?"

"It'll be daylight in ten minutes," Ross snapped back at him. "Hell take the barn, Luke. We'll build another. Let's get going while we can."

They ran for a couple of hundred yards along the edge of the wood, then had to cut straight across the field to dive into the strip of forest on the other side; it was there somewhere that the raiding party had left their horses.

Then they knew they sped headlong into open danger when they shot out across the field, but they banked heavily on the two factors in their favor: First, the dark was like a black blanket yet, for the flames were mere baby things freshly born and enwrapped in swaddling clothes and murky smoke; for another thing, there was little likelihood of Storm or Valdez or their following having any suspicion that any of the fugitives would be turning back in this manner.

Stooping and running and making no noise they crossed the width of the field some several hundred yards below the house and ducked into the timber on the far side and there came to a stop to look about them and to cock their ears against any sound. First of all, they saw a sight impossible to overlook now, the soaring flames spouting up like some devil's growth from the barn. A wild, flickering light gushed out from the burning building, setting everything quivering; even the hiss of the fire began to overlay the silence.

Then they made out a number of swiftly moving figures, men on foot, drawing back from the circle of light.

They sped on again, getting broken, eerily illuminated

glimpses through the pines, searching out the place where the horses were most likely to be. Luck was with them; before they had gone a hundred paces deeper into the wood they heard a man's voice, softly cursing his charges, and heard along with it the muffled stamping of hoofs and jingle of bridle chains.

"There'll be only a man or two left with the stock," said Ross. "This is going to be duck soup."

"Unless the crowd gets it into their head to chase us down on horseback, as they likely will," said Luke. "Come ahead, Kid."

So they hastened forward again and with the conflagration now aiding them as greatly as it threatened to betray them, they saw the horses and made out that only two men were holding them by their tie ropes. And these two, as was to be expected, were stooping and twisting this way and that the better to gain a view of the fire and what was going forward at house and barn. A couple of Indian boys, half grown, they were, from the Valdez hacienda, from their quick guttural remarks to each other.

"We take 'em all in a heap," Luke and Ross had decided. "Ram our guns into their middles—make 'em help us get the horses away and down-valley a mile or so before we scatter them."

So they crept close, closer; and each having chosen his man they pounced the way two stealthy mountain cats pounce. The next thing the two petrified Indians knew was that the barrels of two guns were boring into their ribs and that they stood precariously balanced on the rim of death's chasm.

They got their orders, whispered into their ears, and did as they were told with an alacrity new to them. Disarmed, turned icy at the touch of cold steel, they neither had nor sought any choice. As Luke mounted they were all eagerness to hand him the ends of three lead ropes. He dug his heels in and rode south, still within the timber, and the two Indian boys followed him, one after the other, leading the rest of the horses save one.

Ross swung up into the last saddle to bring up the rear, his rifle over his arm and the menace of it still shuddersomely vivid in their minds.

It was just then, when they were about to get away with their job and none of the raiders the wiser, that little Valdez stirred up trouble. All around scoundrel that he was, with no conscience to keep him awake nights, he was no man of violence and had no stomach for it. When at the outset Ross had fired haphazardly in the direction of Valdez' voice, his bullets had come within inches of putting an eternal stop to the little Don Rooster's crowing. An agony of fear had struck deep into the heart so narrowly missed by searching lead. And then, as luck would have it, a little later still another bullet, from whose gun he had no idea, whizzed so close to him that he fancied it had torn through his coat and blistered his skin. Being a man of devious ways and underground tunnelings, and hence skin-full of suspicion of all others, he leaped to a conclusion which may have had ample cause: In the dark, with men shooting wild, it would be like Tom Storm to put a bullet through him! Always a thorn in Tom Storm's side, why shouldn't Storm make an end of him?

Had he been as honest as his little niece he would have babbled, "I am scared!" As it was he kept his mouth shut, withdrew from the firing line and retreated toward the horses.

Let Storm and the rest fight it out, Don Francisco was homeward bent. To him just then there was no heaven like Paradise Valley.

He was in time to see the horses being taken away; there was light enough spraying out in broken rays from the burning barn for that. He started to run forward, calling to his Indians to stop.

Luke lifted his horse into a lively trot, the Indians spurred close after him—and Valdez, fresh fears besetting him, shouted at them at the top of his voice.

Whether or not Storm had sought to kill him tonight, it is certain that he never did trust Valdez out of sight and right now was watching him. For the next thing that Ross heard was Storm's irate voice asking Valdez what the hell he was up to and what he was running away for. At that Valdez lost his head altogether; he did not see Ross sitting so still in the saddle, mounted on a dark bay horse, all but

invisible in a patch of gloom under the pines. What he saw was the other horses swiftly eluding him, and what he heard was Storm's unexpected voice roaring curses after him—and he started running, as nimble as a youth, as though he could overhaul a running horse, wearing fear for wings on his bootheels.

"You damn' little fool!" said Storm, and ran after him a few steps until he could get him in the clear. And then Storm stopped and coolly took his time to steady his rifle butt against his shoulder—and shot little Valdez in the middle of the back.

"Why, damn you, Storm!" roared Ross. "And that's the way you killed Bob Roberts!"

"Haveril!" shouted Storm, and sounded richly glad. "Haveril, by God!"

The fire racing through the dry-as-dust hay in the barn broke through the shake roof and flared out in sudden glory, filling the sky with light, sending a gush of light through the trees. At almost the same split second the two men fired, and as they squeezed their triggers, Ross's horse reared and pitched. Ross's bullet went wild; he knew that, even while the twin reports were still like one in his ears. And the other thing that he knew and that made him lock his teeth hard together in rage more than in pain was that Tom Storm had had better luck, his bullet searing Ross Haveril's thigh.

With his horse all but unmanageable, lunging frantically, Ross threw himself from the saddle, made out a blot which he supposed must be Tom Storm with his body pressed against a tree trunk, and fired again as Storm was cutting loose at him. A second time Storm's bullet found its mark; Ross felt as though his whole side were being torn away, and went staggering back, fighting hard to keep erect, trying to steady himself and find Storm again, steeling himself against the third and final shot.

He couldn't see Storm. He stood swaying a little despite his grim effort for steadiness; he kept looking for Storm and awaiting his shot so as to make out just where he stood.

The wavering firelight showed him where Storm was and why he had ceased firing.

He lay at the foot of the pine; he stirred and groped for his fallen rifle and tried to get up.

Ross waited a moment. He heard Bull Strake shouting, calling out, "Storm! Storm! Where are you? What's up?" Storm didn't answer; he just kept struggling to rise. Ross turned and saw his horse; it had run only a short distance and had stopped, snorting and jerking its head up and down. He walked slowly to it and clawed his way up into the saddle. Then he heard Luke calling.

"Go ahead, Luke, I'm coming," he said.

CHAPTER XIX

ROSS HAVERIL saw what at first he took to be a large iron spoon floating through the air toward him. He concentrated upon the thing, watching it with frowning interest. It was exactly what it appeared, a big iron spoon, and it was steadily bearing down upon him. He blinked and it wouldn't go away. All right then, let it come ahead. He'd show it a thing or two that most iron spoons didn't know.

So he lay perfectly still, pretending he hadn't seen it. Then, when it was close under his nose he came out of his quiescence like a snake out of its coils. He gave it a sidewise swipe which sent it whizzing out of sight—and which splattered its contents over a pink riding rig—one that had aforetime been a very gay little affair but which now was sadly besmirched and rumpled and altogether woebegone.

"Valgame!" said Carmencita, and stamped. She'd never get over stamping though she lived to be a hundred. She tried to wipe the soup off her clothes and said, "I could cry."

"Let me try," said Rose-alba.

This time Ross didn't see the spoon coming but he did note a pair of olive-green riding breeches and the tops of small high boots advancing upon him, and while he was concentrating on them the spoon treacherously was slipped under his nose again.

He accepted it, his baffled eyes still elsewhere, and mildly started blowing bubbles in it.

Carmencita who was set to cry from sheer weariness and suspense and all-round misery, began laughing. Rose-alba, trying to be very firm, quite the professional nurse though

in her voice there were evidences of weariness and heartbreak, too, said,

"Now, Ross, be a good boy. Swallow your soup, Ross."

He opened his mouth and she slipped the tip of the big spoon between his lips—and Rose-alba could not resist a triumphant glance over her shoulder at Carmencita. His mouth opened a little wider, the spoon was advanced another quarter of an inch—and he snapped at it, got it between his teeth, jerked it out of Rose's hand, worried it as a dog worries a rabbit—and then gave it an upward and outward toss so that for the second time it was sped beyond his ken.

"Damn!" said Rose Devlin.

And Ross, giving himself a bit of a hitch, wincing at the pain which stabbed him, opening his eyes wide and seeing a patch of sky and a fringe of still pine tops, went to sleep.

Later, in an early, still, sweet summer dawn with the skies apple blossom pink and the pines blue-black save for first streaks of light drawing vivid golden lines, Ross stirred and took stock of his surroundings. Also he pieced fragments of memories together. He recalled his argument in the smoke with Tom Storm and wondered in a detached sort of way whether Storm had lived through it. Like a casual happening of long ago he remembered, too, how Luke had come to him, how they had ridden a little way together and Luke had made the Indian boys unsaddle all the horses except the six their party required, and stampede them down the valley.

"Yes, and Valdez is dead. I saw Storm put a bullet between his shoulder blades."

Just where he was now, exactly how he had come here, was a bit hazy in his mind. He had ridden with the rest through a nightmare to some place, he knew that much. Outdoors, it was; no house. He lay on an improvised bed at the base of high black cliffs with a bit of level land under him and with a strong growth of pines in front on a slope which slipped down to a stream; in the hush of the dawn he could hear water running, splashing over rocks, tumbling down into pools.

His bed was of pine tips overlaid with saddle blankets. He was stiff and sore and as weak as a kitten. Where had

Storm's bullet taken him, anyway? He felt the bandage tight about his body— Ouch! In his left side, down through the lower ribs.

"Wonder how long ago that was? Last night?"

He raised a hand and peered at it; he couldn't hold the fool thing steady; it looked as gaunt as he felt. He managed to lift it to his face. His brushing finger tips encountered a sturdy stubble of beard, the only sturdy thing about him, he thought.

He smelled woodsmoke and heard a faint sound, and by twisting his head a little he discovered the Chinaman squatting Chinese fashion, getting a fire started. With that villainous face of his, with his unkempt, wild black hair and ragged clothes—he was barefooted now, having lost his slippers during the ride from Secret Valley—and with his oversized butcher knife dangling from a bit of string at his plump hip, Buttercup looked the part of a bloody-minded pirate.

Yet his pastime was homely enough. He had constructed a fireplace of loose stones against the base of the cliff, had taken pride in his labors and in a minute would be broiling thick venison steaks.

Ross Haveril's haggard eyes drifted elsewhere. Beyond the tops of the pine in front of him rose a steep timbered ridge against the slowly brightening sky, and at one point the ridge swept up into a towering shaft of rock which he found familiar after a while. He closed his eyes and remembered. He and Bob Roberts many a year ago, back in boyhood's balmy season, had risked their necks climbing up there. They had been hunting; they had tramped all day getting there.

"We're in Sundown Canyon," he informed himself. "Luke's a smart old fox. They'd have a job finding us here, and if they did find us they'd have more than a job digging us out."

He wanted to sing out to Buttercup, but it was too much work so he just lay still and let his tired eyes and heavy thoughts drift or stand still. He didn't even ask himself where Luke and Grove Jordan were, or where the girls had gone.

Then he saw two wet pates, the hair just beginning to dry and break out into a tumble of curls, coming upslope through the timber as Carmencita Valdez and Rose Devlin returned from their morning ablutions at a sheltered pool. One girl carried a tin bucket, the other a can, both slopping over with water they had brought for the cook. Haveril's heavy eyes were almost closed; they thought him asleep and slipped silently by to the fireplace, though as they went their eyes were on him.

They were to him then like two bright visions in a fevered dream. He thought, "I saw them both my first night here—and here they are still. And Valdez is dead, and Black Jack Devlin is dead—and maybe Tom Storm is dead—and now they can both go back to the homes they ran away from."

And, still brooking after the fashion of a man who is only mildly curious and doesn't care much one way or the other, he wondered whether they had grown to be friends?

On that he drifted off into heavy slumber again.

Deer flies are not long in finding a camp. They take their fun where they find it, but most of all like to settle so gently as not to be felt on the back of a man's hand close to a vein, flatten down cozily—and give him the works, achieving results to drive a seasoned Jersey mosquito wild with envy. So when Ross Haveril awoke again there was someone sitting quietly at his side, gently waving the brushy tip of a pine branch like an old-fashioned fly brush, banishing these woodland pests from his vicinity.

By her pink riding clothes, once so jaunty, he knew her even before his eyelids rose enough for him to see her face.

She was preoccupied, staring down at the ground, and looked wistfully sad—and so lovely that he just kept his eyes on her hoping that for a while she would not know. But—

"Why, Ross Haveril! You've been wide awake all this time!"

And for some reason altogether beyond him there came a swift tide of color into her cheeks like the flush he had seen in the dawn sky.

"And you look— Why, you look *well!*" cried Carmencita.

Rose Devlin, near by somewhere, heard and came hurrying.

Since his bed was on the ground the two girls, hovering over him, knelt one on each side.

"You are much, much better!" exclaimed Rose-alba.

"I'm all right; I'm fine," said Ross, and added, "Where are the others? Luke and Grove?

Both started to answer together and so both stopped abruptly and looked at each other. N-o; they weren't exactly friends yet.

"Luke and Grove have gone somewhere," said Carmencita, out of silence. "They will come back pretty soon."

"And Luke said," put in Rose-alba, "that when you came to, you weren't to do a lot of talking; he said he'd break our necks if we let you. You're just to lie still and rest."

"Poof!" said Carmencita. "Just to speak ten words won't hurt him. And then he will take his soup."

"Soup?" repeated Ross. "Now where in thunder does soup come from? What do we make it out of and what do we cook it in?"

"Luke rode back to Secret Valley to look around and found some frying pans and things that couldn't burn up," explained Carmencita. "And Grove went hunting yesterday on horseback and shot a deer that was a hundred years old and tough, golly; but it made good soup for you."

Buttercup, noting what was going on, came high-stepping over in his bare feet, and stood grinning down at Ross.

"Good boy, Bossee. Me think allee time you die heap quick; no die, maybe-so no die long time. Heap tough, all samee deer meat. Come get it, Bossee."

"Sh, Wong! You mustn't talk to him so much—or so loud," said Carmencita. "Luke Oliver said he must be kept very quiet."

Ross wasn't quite sure that Rose-alba sniffed but he thought so.

"Luke knows what he is talking about," she said. 'I think, Ross, until you have your soup we ought to leave you to rest quietly."

"It was kind of nice," he said, "to wake up and watch the fly-brush going."

Rose stood up promptly at that and moved away, going

with Buttercup to his improvised kitchen. Carmencita smiled a wise little smile and settled cozily in her place, and resumed the gentle waving of her pine tip.

For a space days and nights drifted by with a strange, calm monotony, not pleasant, not quite earthly or real. For Ross Haveril, between sleeping and waking; the still, tremulous dawns and the comfortably hot noons and the twilights which were like other dawns flowing backward against the stream of time; these aloof hours merged and were already of the stuff of dreams, of an old memory half-forgotten. They erected a framework of poles over where he lay; they topped it with a roof of greenery, stuff from the creek, cool willows and the vivid green flat fronds of giant brakes; thus the hotter rays of the high sun were shut out and still the midnight stars twinkled through. And steadily, since he was as stalwart as a young lion and his bloodstream was clean and strong, his wounds healed and his strength flowed back into him.

Luke came and squatted on his heels and looked him over and grinned.

"Some varmits are sure hard to kill," he observed. "That goes for tomcats, skunks, snakes and Haverils. I got to sort of hoping for the best when I saw what a good job Tom Storm did with you, but I'll have to give up and go right on putting up with you another batch of years, looks like."

"I want to get out of this, Luke."

"What! Lying here on his back like a Turk with two of the niftiest little nurses waiting on him hand and foot, the man's getting restless!"

"Tell me all about everything, old timer. There's a conspiracy around camp to stuff rags down my gullet whenever I open up to ask questions. Tell me."

"Well," said Luke, "there ain't much new, Ross. I've rode about a bit, poking down to Secret and, making a wide bend, dropping across trails with a feller or two. We got to make us a new barn and a new house and a new corral; but shucks—"

"Valdez? Dead, isn't he?"

"Yep. Storm worked him over better'n he did you. Dead and dug under and soon forgot."

"And Storm? Still alive, Luke?"

"That's about all, glory be. You drilled him good, Kid, only you ought to have drawn a mite finer bead and pulled your shot over a couple inches. Still lots of folks are hoping he's going to peg out yet."

"Go ahead."

"Well, let's see. Bull Strake got away without getting hurt but his side-kick, that breed Go-down, got his come-uppance proper and is no more. A couple of the Valdez Injuns carried our marks on 'em; that's about all of that."

"There's nothing to hold Carmencita from going home now, is there?"

Luke cocked up his brows.

"There ain't, huh?" he demanded.

"With Storm down and out, whether temporarily or for good, and with Valdez dead, what's to hinder her?"

"Me, I wouldn't know," said Luke.

"And Rose Devlin, too. She said she'd never go back to the Mountain House, but it's all the home she has or ever had. But she'll get over Black Jack's taking off in time, same as everybody has got to get over everything that hurts, and she'll stop grieving about old Hannigan and— The road back ought to be open to her now, too."

Luke said, plucking at a blade of grass, "Sounds reasonable."

"These days and nights are tough on those two kids," Ross went on. "They've been mighty fine to me, a couple of angels—"

"Angels, my eye!" snorted Luke, and threw his grass away. "But you are right when you say they've been fine to you. I've a funny notion, Mr. Haveril, you'd be a dead Haveril by now if it wasn't for the two of them."

Grove Jordan stumped into view and came to stand over Ross and roll a cigarette. Ross made one for himself and then sketched the plans which had been turning over in his head.

"Grove, we're going back to the valley pretty pronto. There's a job open for you as long as you like. How about calling Secret Valley home from now on?"

"Suits me," mumbled Grove, as surly as ever.

"Then tomorrow morning you get on the payroll. You fork your pony and drift down to Liberty first. Luke will tell you all details; you're to order men and materials as we did not long ago, to rebuild. Then you're to round up some hired hands; talk to Luke about that, too. We're having a herd of cattle brought down from Big Buffalo any day now, and we'll need riders. And while we are picking them, we'll pick men who don't mind the smell of powder smoke. So if Tom Storm ever gets well and tries it again—"

"Sure," growled Grove. "And I'm hoping next time Bull comes along again it's a bright moonlight night."

"Pick up a few tents down in Liberty, too. We'll live in tents until we get some buildings up. While you're riding, Luke will scare up a wagon and snake it up this way; we'll break camp here and go home."

Luke humored him in all things, got Grove aside and coached him in his part—and one delay followed another, for Ross was still in no condition to be moved. So he lay where he was for still other days and nights and made the best of things, and passed many a quiet hour watching the Chinese Buttercup.

Buttercup was having the time of his life. With his butcher knife he cut willow withes down by the creek and made things.

He interwove the pliable thin willows and made trays and platters of them; he even made himself a hat and wore it with an air.

He caught trout, just how no one knew; with his hands in shallow pools perhaps, since he was catlike in three things, love of fish, patience and quickness. Down in the deep, damp grass he nosed and groped about for various weeds and roots; he sniffed and tasted them and used them in his cooking.

He would take his tray and spread big green leaves on it, then present it to Bossee with a brown trout and a slice of venison, and would stand back and beam.

"Between that damn Chink and the two girls," said Luke mournfully, "they'll be dreening all the manhood out'n Kid Haveril."

During many a long quiet hour Ross would lie relaxed,

staring thoughtfully at the strip of sky between the rim of his shelter and the pine tops, but he would snap out of it and be alert enough at the first sound of a footstep. Sometimes he would banter with Carmencita sitting on the log which had been placed near his bed to serve as a bench; sometimes with Rose-alba. Seldom with the two together. And at early dark when they had their camp fire going at a comfortable distance from where he lay and all gathered around it to talk or to listen or just sit and watch the lick of the flames and the final good-night bed of glowing coals, he would look at them in a new, curious fashion which he had developed.

"I think the kid's got something on his mind," said Luke.

He and Grove rode out on various errands, no longer taking any precautions against having their hide-out discovered. Thus word of their adventure and present predicament filtered through the mountain passes and reached the ears of old Romero, Carmencita's faithful retainer down in Paradise Valley. As fast as a fast horse could bring him—he saddled the best on the rancho, the one which no one ever rode but Valdez—he came to make sure with his own eyes that the Little Señorita, the Adored One, was really alive and well.

When she saw his wrinkled old face she ran to him with a glad cry and much to the astonishment of both of them, was in another second in Romero's stringy arms. Already tears were trickling down his nose.

He told her how things were at home: *Seguro,* her uncle, the good man, had passed on to Heaven and his body was buried. In his place her aunt was directing affairs. Her aunt had told everybody, "Well, Valdez is dead now, and not one of you is sorry, no matter what you pretend. And my niece has run away and will never come back; maybe she is dead, too, with so many people killed. So now it is I who am mistress here. And you will do what I say and will do it quick, or I am going to send you away from here, and maybe I'll have them put you in the jail, too."

That made Carmencita angry and she stamped her foot. Then it made her laugh and she said, "Don't tell her about me, Romero. When I come home, and that will be as soon

as Señor Haveril is well again, I will have a nice little talk with Auntie. And now, Romero, you go back, and you go to Liberty and buy yoursef some nice new clothes, splendid oles! And you are going to be my *mayordomo!*"

She was singing all over the place that afternoon and putting wild flowers in her hair. She issued an invitation which was promptly accepted: Ross Haveril, just as soon as he was up and around and could ride a horse again, was coming to see her at her own home.

"I have always been running like a wild girl to see you," she said laughing. "This time you are going to see how I can be like a nice lady!"

The next morning, when Buttercup was beating his frying pan with his iron spoon to announce breakfast and all gathered about his fireplace, they missed Rose-alba. She had left a note stuck in Luke Oliver's hatband.

Black Jack Devlin's daughter had returned to the Mountain House.

And the day after that they broke camp. The wagon had come for Ross and a new order of things had begun.

CHAPTER XX

"*HI, LUKE!*" Luke Oliver stared with all his might. To be sure the sun was in his eyes, but that wasn't half of it.

"Well, I'll be a This and a That and a ring-tailed coon!" said Luke. He sidled up closer, still looking mystified. "I thought you was down in Old Mexico somewhere; wrote you a letter yesterday. What in the name of— Shucks, it ain't you after all, is it, Boss? My mistake. Light down, Stranger, and squat."

Ross drowned him out with that booming laughter of his and leaped down and roughed Luke Oliver the way a Newfoundland pup does.

"Stand back and let me fill up my eyes with all the splendor," said Luke, still as sober-visaged as a congress of judges.

Here, after a six weeks' absence, returned Ross Haveril to Secret Valley, lean and brown and looking as hard as nails once more—but again that wasn't half of it. Luke

looked at Ross's brand new Stetson and envied it, and at Ross's brand new, high-heeled, fancily carved boots, and his mouth watered. Still these accessories were only a fraction of the whole thing. For when Young Haveril jumped down to a level with his old friend it wasn't from the top of a horse but from the inside of a brand new top buggy! The horses were new, as sweet a span of perfectly matched, silky-hided, high-headed, cream-colored, black-maned mares, as ever ran away with any man's top buggy and Sunday girl. There was even a lap robe you'd hate to use, afraid of getting it dirty; the whip in its socket flaunted a red butt and a purple lash.

And as for the buggy wheels, cream-colored, too, with red lines down the spokes—

"Whew!" said Luke, and asked, "Where's the Shetland ponies?"

Grinning at him, Ross demanded, "What are you talking about anyhow?"

"I've most generally noticed," Luke told him mildly, "that about a year after the top buggy, the cradle comes along, and then the Shetlands and—"

"Yell for somebody to put the team away and we'll talk," said Ross.

So Luke whooped and a boy stuck his head out of the barn—a brand new boy and a brand new barn, too—and came on the run. And Luke and Ross together a while were quite silent while Ross looked the place over and kept nodding his head.

"Sort of a good thing they burned us out, Luke, huh? We were getting out of date. Look at us now! We'll have to get the photographer down in Liberty to come up and take us some pictures. I'll bet a man he never saw a ranch house to beat ours, or a barn either or—" He clapped Luke on the back so that Luke's hat fell off and his knees buckled. "You sure done us proud, *compañero.*"

"I sure spent one hell of a lot of money," said Luke when he had stooped and come erect again. "Here's hoping you didn't come back with nothing but holes in your pockets."

Ross dragged out a fat wallet and flourished it before his foreman-and-partner's eyes.

"I sold out everything I owned south of Secret Valley.

It's in the bank and you and I are riding pretty. We're going to spread out here and buy up every acre in sight that we can use; we're going to have an outfit that'll dwarf every other spread in nineteen counties. We're going to flourish like the green bay tree."

"And you're still going to run around with a wad like that on your hip until everybody and his dog knows you've got it—and some dark night your old friend Bull Strake or somebody like him will pop you over—and me, I'll own that fairy tale spread you was talking about so nice and glib."—

"Wrong again, Luke." Ross pocketed his wallet and made a cigarette. "This is just some spending money I'm going to use up real soon. Now—tell me."

So they went and sat on the porch, while Ross's eyes traveled far and wide, missing nothing, whether a recently erected corral or fence or outbuilding. Luke told him.

Well, Tom Storm had refused to die. He was up and around and, men said, irritable and hard to get along with. He, too, had been away, had been all the way to Denver in order to get himself doctored and was only recently returned.

"They say he dropped in to see Queen Carmencita and got the door slammed in his face," Luke chuckled.

"Queen?"

"That's what I said. And it seems Storm showed up at the Mountain House, likewise, and got about the same sort of welcome there. I don't suspect that he's been sweetened up much. Keep your eye peeled, Kid."

Then there was Bull Strake. He hadn't been much in evidence since Ross had made that southern trip of his, a trip both to raise funds and to recuperate. But only yesterday one of the new hands had brought word that Bull was hanging around Lost Valley again.

"How about Grove? Do what I told him?"

"I got a post card from Grove last week; it's took me most of the time since to figger out what he was trying to say. Yep, he done like you said. He went to San Francisco to get him one of those mechanical legs as you said; and he writes it works fine and he could dance with it if he knew how to dance. He'll be back any day now."

" 'Queen' was what you said," Ross reminded him.

"Say! That girl's had a string of bad breaks all her life, with Valdez cooping her up and kicking her around and robbing her of what you call birthrights and stuff like that. Well, here of late she's done not a thing but wallow in good luck. First, she finds a wad of money hid in a drawer where old Valdez hides it; seems as though he was getting scared enough to make a break for somewheres else and was filling his war bags. So she cops on to that like a hound dawg swallowing a hunk of fat."

"Good for Carmencita! It was hers by right anyhow."

"Sure. And next— You know she's a smart little devil, Ross? She did her some fancy thinking and figgering—and she went outside and did a lot of chinning with a lawyer. She says to herself if Valdez did as much crooked work as she got wise to, he must have done a lot more she didn't know about. She always thought it was kind of funny that Paradise Valley had been willed to him instead of her, and she says to herself, 'I bet he stole it and it was mine!' And that's what her lawyer found out; the old sinner had done him some forgery to get started with, or had hired him a forger. And so little Carmencita is by way of getting the valley in her own name."

"Say, Luke—"

"Shut up. Listen to the funny part. Valdez mortgages Paradise Valley to Tom Storm, and ups and spends the money—and now they figger since Valdez never even owned the place the mortgage is worth considerable less than that cigarette butt you just throwed away—and Storm's just out his money!"

Luke had to stop to laugh softly and thoroughly enjoy his laugh.

"Now do I have to tell you about the Queen business? I don't reckon so! Remember the day before we broke camp, and old Romero come bouncing up to see the Señorita and she says she's going to make him her *mayordomo?* Well, you ought to go down and give him a once over: Uniform, sky-blue with gold buttons, blue hat with gold braid all over it, a cape like a brigadier general's lined with the reddest red you ever saw, a shoe shine and a shave every day! Honest, Ross, the old coot swells up so I swear he's bound to bust some day. Well, that gives you the idea. It's like

that all over the ranch. And does little Miss Carmencita doll herself up! You ought to see her; pretty always, wasn't she? Now, indoors and outdoors, strutting through the house or riding a horse, she's a knockout. And all the hands that work for her and used to hate Valdez like poison, they're clean nuts over her. If she'd say chop off somebody's head, and it would be just like her, why they'd grab him and start chopping. And she's beginning to drag in some new friends, young folks that she chummed up with while she was outside gabbing with her lawyer, and they put on parties that make the stars come loose and rattle around, and they all call her *La Reinita.*"

"The Little Queen," chuckled Ross. "Yes, I'll drop in and see her." He grew serious. "She and Black Jack Devlin's girl did a lot for me that time, Luke.—Tell me about Rosealba."

"She went straight back to the Mountain House and has been there ever since, running the place the same way her dad did. With him and old Hannigan gone, Doc and Jimmy Weaver have sort of stepped into their shoes to father-and-mother her. I don't know how she's doing; making and losing, I guess. A feller told me she wants to make a clean-up and quit the racket." He shrugged. "No can do, I speculate. Flush one day, broke the next but, I glean, mostly broke."

Ross stood up.

"Let's go inside and look the house over. And I want to say howdy to Buttercup."

"News gets out," said Luke as they went in, "and folks came from far and wide to see your bathroom—and when they found out there was two bathrooms in the same house they went off arguing whether we was plumb crazy or was figgering to start a hotel." He scratched his head. "Me, times I sort of wondered too."

That evening Grove Jordan returned. The first they knew of his arrival was when they saw him walking to the house from the barn, swinging along with scarcely a sign of leg hesitation. At first blush he was the same Grove Jordan he had been all along, surly and short spoken and with no joy in him. But when they got to talking he forgot himself

and grinned a couple of times, and they caught him looking admiringly down toward his new leg, and in the end when he got up to go he actually said—taking pains to be more sullen than ever—

"Thanks, Ross. Maybe when I get used to this damn fool leg I can do something with it."

In a late afternoon with fragrant dusk creeping out of the pine woods, an hour pervaded by a sun-steeped languorousness which oddly was tinged with a hint of restiveness, Luke Oliver and Grove Jordan out by the barn watched Ross drive away. The spick-and-span team, newly curry-combed and brushed, flashed the sunshine back from their sleek hides, and the buggy wheels sparkled as the spokes made a shining blur in their small orbits. Down valley the little doves were calling, and in the hills the mountain quail whistled as they marched to water, and the big crested blue jays made blue gleams against as blue a heaven—and Luke and Grove leaned against the corral and speculated.

"Where's he going, Luke?"

"He didn't say. The way he's dressed fit to kill, haircomb and everything, looks like there was a girl in the woodpile."

"Which one, Luke?"

"Hard to tell. Going in a buggy that way he's got to go down Valley, no matter. If we was around the bend where the road forks we could tell if he's headed for Paradise Valley or the Mountain House."

"Which way you betting, Luke?"

"I'll bet you on heads or tails, or odd or even, or the weather or which way a cat'll jump or how many beans in a sack," said Luke. "All I know is, Ross has been sort of restless all day." He cocked a sudden eye in Grove's direction.

"Same as you have," he grunted.

"Me?" demanded Grove innocently. Too innocently, thought Luke, and by way of a snort said as much.

"Let me catch you and Ross cooking up anything between you and leaving me out of it," he promised, "I'll spit in your eye and drown you."

"You're crazy," grumbled Grove.

"Ross is a funny bird." Luke went on, his eyes once more

on the shining outfit speeding down valley. "He's got a wad of money in his tail pocket; brought it back with him this last trip down to Texas and Mexico. What for? Spending money, says Ross. Now what in tarnation could you spend money for up here?"

"Booze," said Grove sensibly.

"A few dollars maybe; sure. But a pocket book jam full? Next, I notice he asks me a lot of questions about how Black Jack Devlin's girl is doing over at the Mountain House. And he remembers he shook her old man down for more'n fifty thousand. And once or twice he says how her, meaning Rose, and the Valdez girl up and saved his bacon that time he got shot up. And only yesterday he says kind of carelesslike that some day he's going to try his luck again up there and maybe make another killing. Now string all that together, Mr. Jordan, and what do you make out of it?"

"I'd tell you if I knew," said Grove after he'd done his bit of frowning, watching the buggy diminish in the lower lands as Luke was doing. "What?"

"I don't know if that's where he's going this time or some other time," Luke told him. "But I do know sometime he's going to drop in on Rose Devlin and lose a wad of money —and come home grinning. He knows if he offered to give it back to her she'd slap his face. And he knows well's we do that if he keeps on playing long enough he'll lose. And that's something I'll bet you on, Mr. Jordan."

They fell silent a while and in silence watched the buggy out of sight around the bend where the lower hills came down.

"Me, if I was him, I know which road I'd take," said Grove.

"Me, too," said Luke.

Ross Haveril pulled up at the Hacienda Valdez gate. It was a new, sturdy gate, heavily padlocked. On a bench under a little green roof lolled a man with a rifle over his arm. Ross grinned understandingly, seeing the hand of Queen Carmencita. The man, a young Indian, was dressed in the sort of gear young Mexican *vaqueros* fill with their important persons on gala days; silver conchas and sash and jacket and all that.

The guard slouched forward, beady eyes peering out from under wide hat brim. First he made sure that this wasn't Tom Storm, come in disguise; next he recognized Ross whom he had seen somewhere; and finally he threw the gate wide with a flourish of his sombrero and a white-toothed, *"Entra, Señor!"*

An ornate and haughty Romero opened the door to him. He was shown into a big gloomy room, unlighted, though he saw that there were lights already on in other parts of the house. And a gust of voices came to him, young voices sounding as young voices should sound, very gay. Romero lighted candles and departed.

And then there was Carmencita.

If there is anything lovelier than a lovely girl in summertime—in a light summery dress like Carmencita's, frothy and blue, with blue ribbons, and little, high-heeled, blue silk slippers that a man could hold in the palm of his hand and marvel at—Ross Haveril couldn't think what it was.

For an instant she stood on the threshold and just looked at him, and one hand was pressed against her heart as if she had been running. Her eyes in the shadows of her hair, softly and liquidly bright, and her warm red lips, always so mobile, so ready to grow tremulous, conveyed him her first greeting before she spoke a word. Then she came to him almost running, and put out both of her hands to be swallowed up in his as a smile he so well remembered shaped her mouth and gave a glint of small white teeth, and Carmencita said, her voice low-toned and husky,

"Oh, Ross!—Oh, Ross! It's so *nice* to see you! . . ."

He had kissed her the first time he had ever seen her. He had kissed her again that night when Secret Valley was raided. He came mighty, mighty close to kissing her the third time right now, with her hands so warm in his. But of a sudden like a lot of things fired out of a gun, a flock of young people came bursting in on them, Carmencita's house guests, calling for her, calling, *"Reinita! Reinita,* we want you."

"Reinita!"

The Little Queen! Well, why not?

There were introductions; Ross had a confused memory

thereafter of several nice looking girls and boys; there was a son or a daughter of Carmencita's lawyer, and there was a nephew of Scotty Madden, the big mining man, and the Beldens, scions of Judge Belden of Liberty—and so on. And they all wanted Reinita about something or other, but she shooed them off, laughing at them, standing close to Ross, explaining,

"But this is my neighbor and friend, Mr. Ross Haveril of Secret Valley, and you know about *him!* And I have to talk with him a few minutes— Oh, it is important."

So she blew them a kiss and left them staring after Ross Haveril of Secret Valley of whom they had heard a great deal—from Carmencita!—as she dragged him off to the *patio.*

As they went Ross saw the funereally sombre form of the black-clad Tia Juana, Carmencita's auntie and chaperone, looking severely after them. To her, as to the others, Carmencita blew an impudent kiss.

"Now," said Carmencita, arranging her skirt as she sat on a bench against the white wall, resting among its folds as upon a cloud, "we are going to see a moon come rolling up in a minute and you are going to tell me— Oh, about everything! You are all well and strong again, no?"

The *patio* in the evening was exactly what a *patio* should be in a place called Paradise Valley, and presently, when Carmencita's moon came rolling up, it was obvious that it had never heard the heresy of it being useless and extravagant excess to paint the lily and adorn the rose. It went right on about its business of overlaying what was already perfect with further perfection.

Once as they talked, touching on Tom Storm, against whom Carmencita had given orders for eternal vigilance on the part of her men, she said,

"I have a lawyer now—I am a business woman!—and I told him everything I heard that night under Tom Storm's window, how he had killed men, anyhow two of them! And I said they must put him in jail all of his life. But my lawyer, he says, No. He says it wouldn't do any good because Señor Valdez is dead and no one could prove anything and Mr. Storm would get out again and laugh at me, and would just hate me more. Sometimes—" She twitched

her shoulders as though she shivered. "Sometimes I get scared again, even with my men watching all the time."

Touching lightly on past, present and future, they had disposed of pretty much of everything under moon and stars before Rose-alba was mentioned. Carmencita said at last with very marked elaborateness,

"Oh, and the Mountain House girl, Rosie Devlin. I haven't seen her—have you?"

She had seen, as in the days of old, the sunlight glinting from the windows of the lofty house; even now, if you knew just where to look, there was a light like a star low down on the ridge, and that was a lamp shining through the Mountain House windows. But she didn't point it out and Ross didn't notice it.

Answering her question, he said, "No, I haven't seen her yet."

Carmencita was smiling at him. But then he added, "I am going up that way now. They tell me that she is running the games the way Devlin used to. I am going to try my luck once more."

"Oh," said Carmencita, and there was a little silence. Then she laughed softly, "I went there once, remember? That was the first time I ever saw you! And I dressed up like a Mexican boy and made poor old Romero take me and—"

She jumped to her feet and stood looking at him queerly. Then her eyes, brightly soft in the mellow moonlight, began to twinkle and she clapped her hands animatedly, and exclaimed,

"Oh, but we are all going to go! *Vamos a ver!* It is going to be fun! You see, my friends are going away, some tomorrow, the rest the next day, and they have been asking, What are we going to do with tonight! That was why they were calling 'Reinita, Reinita,' just now. We are all going to go to the Mountain House, and we will gamble and have a wild time!"

Why not? Ross told her of his new team and buggy. He wanted her to see it.

"You'll go with me, won't you, Carmencita? The others can come along on horseback."

"But in a buggy? Can you ever get up there?"

"Up the old road, by the old Balbriggan place. It's longer and not much of a road but we can get there all right. If you just say the word—"

"I'd love it!" said Carmencita.

All her guests were properly thrilled except one glowering young man.

"She goes for a buggy ride in the moonlight—the rest of us any old way on horseback," he said disgustedly.

So the little queen of Paradise Valley had it all her way—yet Ross noted particularly one of her guests—it was handsome young Steve Belden—who looked angry and worshipful at the same time; who didn't like being dismissed like that and who didn't mean to stand back overlong for any rival.

And he saw, too, how Carmencita, coquetting, flashed her big eyes at her ardent admirer.

"Looks like a love story," thought Ross.

But Carmencita was drifting along at his side, out of the moonlit *patio*.

CHAPTER XXI

IF THERE is anything lovelier than a lovely girl on a moonlight summer night—

Well, then—two lovely girls!

Rose-alba glowed. Her color was high, her spirits were high, her eyes were lambent with an inner light. Jimmy Weaver was at the piano; the night and the moon had got him, too; he had a wistful eye on the open window and the wide, beautiful world rolling down and away from these heights, and his music told you things which he could have expressed in no other way. He liked to make hard men soft with his music, bemused himself in a mood partly the devil's own, partly angelic. Rose-alba throbbed to his music—and outside she had just heard a man laugh!

Already she knew that Ross was home again—and that he had gone buggy riding. For Grove Jordan's restlessness which Luke had noted during the day had finally put him back into the saddle, and Luke Oliver had demanded, "What's eating you, Grove? Where the hell you going?"

and Grove had mumbled in his surly way, "Over to the Mountain House, and what's it to you?" and Luke had ridden with him. About the first thing Luke had done was ask Rose-alba if she had seen Ross. So she knew—and Luke had an answer to his own question: It was to Carmencita that Ross had gone in all his top-buggied splendor.

And now he as well as Rose-alba heard Ross's laugh outside.

The girl was at the door to greet him when he came in.

"Ross! It's good to see you after all this time. My, but you're looking fit again. We'd begun to wonder— Oh, hello, Carmencita," she said, and all of a sudden something went out of her voice and out of her eyes, and she was merely pleasant and friendly and polite.

"Hello, Rose," said Carmencita politely.

Then Rose-alba saw all the others, Carmencita's guests, trooping in, the girls taking her in from top to toe with frankly widened eyes, the men pressing forward to get to know her.

There were a few moments of gay confusion during which the men at the bar and those at the gaming tables neglected their immediate personal matters to watch the eddying invasion. Then briefly Ross and Rose-alba were alone as Carmencita's guests, sweeping her along with them, swooped down upon the roulette table. Carmencita's laugh, very gay, floated back to them as of her crowd she was the first to put a coin on a number.

Rose-alba smiled at Ross. But something had gone out of her smile, too.

"I heard you were back; Luke and Grove told me. You must have had a wonderful trip; you look all new again, as good as ever."

"Yes. And I've never forgotten how much I owe—"

"You're crazy! You're just one of those tough hombres, hard to kill. And if anything besides your own toughness pulled you through, it was Buttercup's soup."

Luke ambled over.

"Hi, Luke! What are you doing here, wide awake this time of night?"

"Hello, Kid. Me, maybe I got restless too. First you, then Grove; he's been like a cat on a hot stove all day." He

glanced over the room and added, "He was here a while ago; if he's sneaked for home without me I'll strangle him in his bed. What are you up to?"

Ross grinned down at Rose-alba and got a stock smile in return.

"I thought I might get a game tonight?"

"Anything you like," she nodded back at him.

"I was going to ask you to deal roulette for me again. Remember?"

"I'd hardly forget! Mr. Haveril, the lone wolf from the pampas, came in to howl, and shook the house down for— It was around fifty thousand, wasn't it? And walked away with it! Oh yes, I remember!"

He glanced at the roulette table; you could hardly see it for Carmencita's crowd swarming over it, placing their small bets, making a great to-do over winning or losing a dollar. At that moment Carmencita herself cried out merrily, "Ooh, look! I am winning some more. You see, I told you: I have all the good luck there is tonight!"

Ross said to Rose-alba,

"How about some other game? Make-or-break, you know, and no lingering agony?"

"Sudden death, Mr. Haveril?" she laughed back at him, and was every whit as gay as Carmencita.

"That's it! That's the stuff for you and me. How about—"

"Dice?" she said swiftly. "Or— Sudden death, Ross? Slice the deck and high card wins? Is that fast enough?"

"Let's go!" said Ross. "Just the two of us. I've been waiting for this."

"So have I!" said Rose-alba. And Luke Oliver, smothering a broad grin, followed them as the girl led the way across the room to a quiet corner and then to a small round table.

She broke out a fresh deck and Ross placed his wallet on the table before him.

"Heeled tonight?" he asked.

She nodded brightly. "The roof is the limit and maybe we can take that off for you if you feel frisky."

She shuffled the deck and handed it to him; he shuffled again and passed it back. She cut and offered him the deck to cut again if he liked. He shook his head.

"Let her go. High card wins, ace high. One thousand bucks, Miss Devlin?"

"One thousand," said Rose-alba, and sliced the deck.

He made his own slice and they turned the cards up. With his ten of diamonds to her six of clubs he won. Ross chuckled, and Rose-alba kept on smiling.

"That's one on you, Miss Devlin," he teased her.

There was a drawer under the table; she drew it out and stacked some blue chips on the table. One of these she shoved across to him.

"The blues are a thousand each," she said. "I'll cash them for you when you say."

"Fine. Let's go. Another blue."

They cut again, Rose-alba having shuffled and offered him the deck which he waved away.

He showed a jack and she cut a deuce—and shoved a second blue chip to him.

"You're doing nicely, Mr. Haveril," she said as lightly as though these blue chips were just blue chips, merely that and nothing more. He cocked up his brows at her; he had never known a girl—or a man either, at her young age—show such unruffled indifference. Yet down underneath she must care.

"Four thousand?" he said, watching her.

She put out four chips and he covered them—and they cut—and Rose Devlin showed a king against his queen and drew in the winnings.

Any table where stakes start running wild draws a crowd, and it wasn't long before a semicircle of onlookers joined Luke. Among them were some of Carmencita's friends and Carmencita herself. She looked at the money on the table, then at Ross and at Rose-alba and whispered something to Luke.

"Huh?" queried Luke. "What's that?"

"You tell Ross," was what she whispered, "to look out. She is going to cheat him! I can tell. I can see it in her eyes and that way she is smiling!"

Luke laughed at her and moved away; with these others taking an interest his own interest, a mere flash in the pan, was gone. He knew well enough what the outcome would be; if a man made up his mind he was going to lose, well

he'd have no trouble doing it at any game. And he was curious about Grove. He went outside to see whether Grove's horse was still at the hitching rail.

If Ross Haveril was out to lose, Rose Devlin was out to win, so it seemed inevitable that both would have their wishes with everybody happy. If either could have read what was in the other's head . . . but they couldn't, so speculation is out. Whether he won or lost, he laughed, such being his way even at times that he cared about the money; whether she lost or won, she wore that gay smile of hers or a placid expression of cool indifference.

She let him win now and then, some bets of a thousand, some larger bets, but never after the first two cuts did she permit her last blue chip to stray from in front of her. After the third play she was two thousand dollars ahead; not once after that was she down below that margin of safety.

She knew how he had a way of piling his bets up, and watched and waited and did not have to wait long.

"Double the bet?" he suggested, grinning at her after a loss of four thousand.

"Let's go," said Rose-alba. She had eight thousand dollars of his under her hand. She shoved it forward. "Right?"

For an instant she thought that he hesitated; he just sat there looking at her, waiting for her eyes to come to his. They did in a direct look, and she tipped her head sideways and gave him back a smile that was a silent laugh.

She cut a card and held it face down, her eyes still on his and seeming to mock his playfully.

He reached out without glancing at the deck and made a swift cut.

Together they flipped the cards over and both began to laugh.

He had cut an ace.

So had Rose-alba!

The crowd gathered as spectators nudged one another and looked from the players' into each other's tense faces; for once you would have sworn that the onlookers were contending with quicker heart-beats than the gamblers. And you would have been right.

"Another eight?" said Ross.

"Here we go," said Rose-alba. "Sixteen thousand says

my trey will top your deuce."

"Me, I'm out for an ace," he told her.

But again it was Rose-alba's ace. She wasn't taking any chances now. And her ace over his seven dragged sixteen thousand dollars out of him and stood her at a winning so far of twenty-four thousand. And Ross put back his head and laughed, and everyone knew he laughed because he was amused—though no one could tell he was delighted; and Rose-alba kept on smiling—and out of the corners of her eyes shot one bright glance toward Carmencita Valdez.

"That's twenty-four, Mr. Haveril, thank you," she said pleasantly. "That will help put a new roof on the house. Or—some more?"

"That's about half what you made me carry away last time, remember? And I've got a few beans left. How about shooting the works this trip? My twenty-four against yours? Right? Here we go, Miss Devlin!"

"Here we go, Mr. Haveril!"

But they didn't go. It doesn't take long to shuffle a deck and set it forth on the table, but an explosion requires even less time. And the interruption which stopped their play was by way of being explosive.

Luke Oliver outside, looking for Grove Jordan or Grove's horse, had found neither. "Confound the pup," said Luke and wandered about a bit, looking at the stars and smoking, and coming back to the house. With his foot on the first step leading up to the high porch, he heard a rider coming up from the west and idly turned to see who it was.

Here came Grove, riding hard. Luke called to him and Grove reined in.

"Where the hell you been over that way and what you been up to?" he demanded.

Grove, coming down out of the saddle, chuckled. Now, Grove Jordan was the most economical man with mirthful sounds that Luke had ever known, and he wondered afresh. Grove waved an arm wildly, pointing back the way he had come.

"You can't see it good from here, but you can sort of get the idea," he said.

Then Luke saw readily enough and wondered that he had not seen sooner. The fire itself was hidden by the timbered shoulder of the mountain, but there was a bright and brightening glow down yonder, broad against the timbered dark.

"Man!" exclaimed Luke. "It's down in Lost Valley. A fire at Tom Storm's place!" Then he got the idea in its entirety. He grasped Grove's arm, saying sharply, "You've been down there! You set Storm afire!"

Grove, awkward always, seemed overcome by bashfulness.

"Aw, shucks, that wasn't nothing," he muttered. "Look at all Ross has gone and did for me, buying me this leg and all. And it ain't much I've did for him; all it cost me was a little ride and a couple matches and a bottle kerosene—and I pinched the kerosene and matches from Ross's place anyhow."

"Well, dog my cats!" gasped Luke Oliver.

And then, not ten minutes behind Grove Jordan, came Tom Storm.

It was a Tom Storm half crazed with fury. He had seen the flames eating into his barn and outbuildings, and had fought with his men against the conflagration, had soon realized that there was little that could be done, had left them to do that little without him—and had ridden this way as though the devil were after him—or riding at his elbow.

"It's Storm!" muttered Grove. "How in hell—"

"Sure, you jackass. He'll figger Ross did it, and he'll come shooting."

Enough light poured out through the Mountain House windows to show them who it was as Storm flung down from the saddle. In a flash Luke Oliver, acting on heady impulse yet with a cool brain riding above it like a steady star over a storm wrack, piled on top of Tom Storm and brought him, unbalanced as he was from just dismounting, crashing to the ground. And Grove Jordan, all but instantly breaking the ice of uncertainty, lent a hand. In two shakes they had whipped Storm's gun away from him and let him up.

"There's been enough killing in Rose Devlin's house," said Luke.

Storm breaking free, cursed him in a roaring voice but didn't stop even for that. It was Storm's voice, uplifted in a rage that was unmistakable and that caused all who heard it to jerk about and stop breathing, that broke off the game of cutting for the high card.

Rose-alba, springing up, exclaimed with a quick bright anger of her own, "I told that man never to come here again!" Ross Haveril, on his feet with her, knowing in his bones that here at last was the show-down between Tom Storm and himself, plowed through the crowd packed about the table and started to the door. And Tom Storm as he came rushing in came very, very close to being shot through the heart. For Ross's gun was in his hand and he, like Luke, was so dead sure that when Storm came he would come shooting, that it was only in the nick of time that he saw the man's hands were empty, and doubled up into fists.

Storm saw him standing out in front of the others; whether or not he even noticed the weapon in Ross's hand there is no knowing. In his present mood, being a man with little fear in him, and much hate swollen now with rage, no gun would have stopped him.

The two men didn't have anything to say to each other. In time Ross Haveril saw how it was with Storm, and tossed his gun away with a backward flip, sending it slithering across the floor to vanish under men's feet. As Storm bore down upon him like something shot out of a cannon he hurled himself forward to meet him, and the two came together with a jolt and a jar and a thud that sounded loud in the silent room.

Storm, lashing out with brutal force, struck Haveril in the upper body as Ross's clubbed fist crashed into his jaw, and the two hurtling bodies which had just come together with so savage an impact reeled back from each other. But neither fell, and they both steadied themselves and bore down upon each other again with no lessening of heady purpose.

"Stop 'em!" somebody yelled, but, "Leave 'em alone!" nearly everyone else shouted.

They stood up and battered at each other, with no

thought to the science of the thing, with little conscious thought of fending off blows, no battle-cunning in either of them but, in its stead in both, a primal urge to merciless, murderous onslaught. In a few seconds Ross Haveril's mouth was cut and bleeding and his upper body bruised; there was a cut over Storm's eye and the blood kept trickling down so that it looked as though his cheek had been split open.

Both faces, save for the blood smears, were white, yet scarcely whiter than many of the faces turned in fascinated horror to watch them.

Obviously they were as even a match as these rough old mountains could turn out, yet just as obviously there was a slight advantage, and it was Storm's: He by some ten pounds was the heavier man; and Tom Storm wore plain, flat-heeled boots whereas Ross Haveril, in his holiday finery, wore high heels, and high heels are not meant to fight in, being tricky and apt to turn. And the odd thing was that these two advantages of Tom Storm's worked Storm's undoing.

For, keenly aware of his superiority in weight, he used that weight, every vital pound of it, as a man may use a sledge hammer. He hurled himself at Haveril, his feet leaving the floor as he plunged, his fist a war club striking with all that Storm had of muscle and power and weight and hate behind it—and Ross's heel turned, and he went crashing to the floor. But before Storm could trample him, he squirmed and writhed like a snake and avoided the enrush by a hair, and came up to his feet again, resilient and eager. And all that the fall had accomplished was this: The two men had changed positions so that now Ross was nearer the door through which Storm had entered, his back to it.

And the end, which neither could glimpse, being so near as it was yet still a thing formless and invisible in the dark of the future, was no further away than some half dozen blows and seconds.

They struck and reeled back, both of them, and came together and lashed out with an ever increasing fury and their sweaty bodies grappled together—and they went reeling like two drunken men, like two infuriated bears, out

through the door, swept Tom Storm's weight out onto the porch—across the porch and against the railing. Then, above the battering of bone and flesh, there was the crash of breaking timbers, and a girl shrieked and many voices called out gaspingly—and Ross Haveril and Tom Storm, clutching even then at each other's throats, plunged downward out of sight.

Luke and Grove were the first to them. Where the two men fell they lay without so much as the twitch of a muscle. It was too dark down there close to the house where no lamp ray penetrated to make out one from the other.

"Ross! Ross!" Luke called anxiously, stooping close.

"All right, Luke," said Ross. He moved then and stood up and looked down at Tom Storm. Storm still did not stir, did not speak.

He lay like that until they came running with lanterns. He had landed on his back, Ross on top of him. And under the middle of Tom Storm's back was a rock with a jagged, sharp edge.

"Dead?" asked Ross, his voice sounding grimly heavy and dull.

Luke straightened up. "No, not dead. He might as well be though, if I am any judge. If his back ain't broken—well, he won't do any talking for a long time—if ever. And serves him good and right."

"Yes, serves him right," said Ross, very grave and quiet. "Just the same—I feel sick inside."

Other men gathered about the fallen Storm, and Ross moved away, going back up the steps. Then there was Carmencita at his side, her hand on his arm, her eyes uplifted to his and filled with such a look as he had never seen fully revealed in them before.

"Oh, Ross! You are all right then? Oh, thank God you are all right! I—"

"Yes, I'm all right, Carmencita."

"If you had been hurt—" she whispered, and he saw the shine of wetness on her cheeks.

He patted her hand gently.

"Good kid, Carmencita. Yes, I'm fine."

While he stood there Luke passed him, going on up the steps.

Looking over the broken railing was Rose-alba, the lamplight flowing across her head, strewing light rays through her hair and etching her white face against the night. She said to Luke,

"Tell me."

He told her what he knew and they passed inside together.

"Come here," she said to him, and led him to the table where she and Ross had played. "Look at that. Twenty-four thousand dollars I won from him."

"Fine!" chuckled Luke. "Bully. I'm glad you did."

"I'll tell you something, Luke," she said, and the tone of her voice, in such dead earnest was she, jerked his eyes back questioningly to hers. "Yes, I'll tell you something!" She crumpled the banknotes in her hand with such violence that her knuckles went whiter than her face. "I hate this place. I will never play here again; I will not go on living here. And there is something else I hate—and Ross and Grove, that brute thing of a Grove Jordan!—taught me to hate it! They fought once because each swore the other won! And tonight— You see this money?"

She stuffed it into his hand and Luke stared harder than ever.

"What's wrong, Rose? What's happened to you?"

"Take that money. I won't have it. Take it with you and when you get back home give it to Ross—"

Then Luke, thinking to do the right thing, patted her hand very much as Ross had patted Carmencita's and said, chuckling,

"Don't let that money worry you, Rose Devlin. Listen and I'll tell you something—only you've got to swear by all that's good and holy that you'll never open your head about it if you live to be a hundred and ninety."

"What is it, Luke?"

"He didn't say a word to me, mind you, but I *know!* He always felt that that fifty thousand he won the first time—well, that it was your money and that you needed it and he didn't. He came up here to lose it back to you. Why, ever since—"

Rose-alba began to laugh wildly, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Take him back his money, Luke. And tell him—tell him I cheated to win it!"

She saw Ross coming in, and whirled and ran.

But Ross saw her, too, and how she ran, and he then fell to staring at the queer expression stamped deep on Luke Oliver's face. Half a dozen long strides brought him to Luke.

"Tell me," he said, and for some reason or other his voice rasped, harsh in his throat. "What's gone wrong, Luke?"

Luke's throat, too, was constricted; Ross saw his Adam's apple strike upward, contract and vanish as Luke, swallowing hard, came close to strangling.

"Me," said Luke, "I guess I better go have a drink. As for you, Kid, you chase after her and fight it out. One thing— Hell, Kid, she juggled the cards on you and what's more she told me so, and—"

Ross wanted to laugh but something stopped him.

"I know, I know," he said impatiently. "The poor little kid—"

"She's running wild— You better—"

Ross didn't wait. A door had slammed behind Rose-alba, a frantic soul seeking flight from something which crushed her. He flung the door open and burst into the thick dark of a room that was all strange to him. He called, "Rose! Rose-alba!" and kept on running. For he saw a pale rectangle of lesser dark and heard the swift patter of small running shoes.

. . . After that he saw her only vaguely and lost her, and vaguely found her again as Rose Devlin, fleeing from all she knew and all she had, and all she hated, sped along the ridge and straight toward the old rock on which she had stood so many a time in her small bright-and-dark life, looking up at the stars, looking out across the bulwarks which the mountains lifted against the stars, looking with straining eyes into herself and into life and into all the mysteries.

And it was atop Faraway Rock that Ross Haveril at last came up with her.

He could see her eyes, glimmering, wet eyes with the moon in them. He saw, too, the squared determination in her face.

"Ross, I'm glad that you came," she said. "Ross, I cheated you tonight."

It was not consciously that he sought to touch her. His hand went out and closed firmly on hers.

"I know, dear," he said. "It doesn't make any difference—"

"Black Jack and that sweet Hannigan, they taught me many things," she said, and he had to stoop close to catch her words. "But they did not teach me everything. You came; Grove Jordan came, too, and you two taught me. And, Ross—"

All of a sudden she was finding it hard to go on. He put a strong arm about her and held her close.

She smiled up at him then; he could see her smile in the moonlight.

"I wanted a lot of money, Ross. I wanted it from you. Isn't that a little bit funny somehow? *I wanted it from you!* Ross, do you know that I love you? Or is it that I just almost love you? Now don't, Ross; don't make love to me, and don't make me make love to you. Just listen—for a good-bye. You must listen to me, Ross."

And he said very gently, "Yes, Rose-alba, I am listening to you."

"Maybe I do love you," she said in a quiet, wondering voice, and for the first time her hand touched his cheek. "Maybe I was going to love you—and something stopped all that, I wish with all my heart that I knew, so that I could tell you. But Ross— This won't hurt you, will it?"

"No. I won't let it hurt me, Rose-alba."

"You are so fine, you have so glorious a heart to understand! Ross, every time— Oh, Ross, I would see Bob! Bob Roberts' face would come bearing down upon me, shaping up out of the dark—coming between you and me. Ross. And— That money, Ross; I wanted it for a crazy thing. And I know that God sent you to come to me right here on this old rock. Right here, with every cent I could win from you —*and I cheated to win!*—I was going to build a great high white tower that they could see for a hundred miles—a monument to my old darlings—to Bob, and to Black Jack, and to dear old Hannigan! As for me, I am through—"

"Through, Rose-alba! *You?* Why, listen—"

"Sh! You listen. Ross, how can I talk to you like this?" She was clinging to him; their eyes straying from each other's faces wandered deep down into the shadowy valleys, then came back home. "I've never talked to anyone else— It's like— Listen, Ross! Maybe I just dreamed it! I saw a high granite column, white shining granite all shot through with gold quartz— You know?—just like Black Jack and like old Hannigan— And—" She began to sob; then caught herself up short, she being, mind you, Black Jack Devlin's daughter.

"Ross," she said quite simply, very quiet now, "I am going away. I have finished up here. Before you came, the very day you came, Black Jack, God bless him, wanted to send me to a convent. And I am going. Not tomorrow but tonight. Oh, no," and she laughed softly and gave his arm a little squeeze, "I don't promise to stay there all my life. And yet— Maybe—"

She became very still and was hushed and solemn when she went on.

"Good night, Ross Haveril," was what she said. "I'll run along now. Wish me luck?"

"Luck, Rose-alba," he said. And he held steady a moment, thinking clearly, discounting the hammering of his pulse. Then he knew. He said, "Your white granite tower, all shot through with gold, is going to be. If you don't build it, I will. And tomorrow when you have slept and thought all about everything—"

"Tomorrow? Tomorrow?—"

He drew her close to him, closer and closer. Her face was uplifted. They kissed—

It was again one of those late summer afternoons with late summer's magic in the air.

"I sort of feel like going for a buggy ride," said Ross.

"Pretty soon you'll be forgetting how to fork a horse," Luke warned.

Ross laughed at him and went out to the barn. He was walking on his heels and wore his hat far back and was breathing deep of the essence of the hour; Luke could see that.

"Where are you going this trip, Kid?" he demanded.

Ross laughed at him again.

"You look so damn smug I could cut your throat for you," said Luke.

He watched the buggy, newly washed and gleaming, and the span of cream-colored mares with their manes looking like carded black silk, as man and mares and buggy whirled down valley. He still stood stock still watching them out of sight; he saw Ross take the curve on two wheels to vanish under the wooded hill which hid the fork in the two roads. Luke threw down his pipe and stomped on it and kicked the pieces clean over the corral.

"Dog my cats!" said Luke Oliver.

THE END

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